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Defining Orthodoxy



Church History - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses the history of the early Christian creeds and the concept of orthodoxy. He explains that the word "orthodoxy" comes from the Greek words meaning "right belief" and argues that creeds were created to define and solidify the basic beliefs of Christianity. Gregg also explores the controversies and debates surrounding specific creeds, such as the Council of Trent's anathema against the idea of salvation by faith alone. Ultimately, Gregg concludes that while creeds have their place in defining Christianity, knowing and having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is ultimately what matters most.

Transcript

In tonight's study of the history of the Church, we're going to be talking about the creeds, some of the early creeds. Not all of them. We're not going to be talking about the Apostles' Creed, for example.

Already we're looking at a time too late to take in the origin of that creed, but actually what I want to talk about is the transition period where Christianity, in my opinion, was redefined. Now, I can't prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was redefined and that what came about out of this period was as different from what Jesus and the Apostles established as I think it was. But I don't say it lightly either.

From my consideration of the past 30 years of what Jesus taught, what the Apostles taught, the way that my understanding has been formed of the primitive Church, and what happened during the period that we'll be talking about, it does seem to me there was a significant change in the character of the definition of Christianity. Because it seems to me, although it's hard to get back at it because we live in, you know, after centuries of thinking another way, I believe that when Jesus first started His movement, that it was a movement that was defined by people throwing in their lot with Him and leaving all behind in order to follow Him and learn from Him and do what He said. And we call those people disciples.

Jesus called them disciples. There was not probably an elaborate theological

comprehension on the part of most of Jesus' early disciples. We could assume that they had basic Jewish beliefs.

I was about to say more or less orthodox, but it's difficult to say what orthodox Jewish belief would have been defined as because the rabbis had different opinions about almost every subject. And it's hard to say. You know, some of the disciples thought they should overthrow Rome.

Others thought they should get a job for Rome and did so. There were different approaches to Judaism, even in Jesus' day. We can say this, the theological thing that the disciples in the early days had in common was they certainly believed in the God of Israel.

They were not atheists, in other words, and they were not polytheists. And they also believed that Jesus was in some sense sent by that God to save them in some sense. Now, it seems to me from reading the Gospels that in the early days, the apostles weren't even sure in what sense Jesus was there to save them.

I think that initially they thought He was there to bring about a political liberation, which is what most of the Jews were hoping for. I'm not saying the disciples didn't also have a hunger for something more than that. I'm just not sure they understood that the salvation Jesus came to bring was anything more than that.

And even after His resurrection, where you would think after spending three years with Him they would have a little bit of a grasp of what He was all about, they even asked Him, will you at this time restore the kingdom unto Israel? Which we presume means will you liberate Israel from the Roman oppressors and restore the kingdom to them? As most of the Jews thought Jesus was supposed to do, even John the Baptist didn't understand the nature of that salvation. Although he announced it, he was surprised that Jesus didn't go about to overthrow the Roman power. And when John himself was arrested and imprisoned by a Roman official, he apparently got tired of being there and sent messengers to Jesus, and said, well, are you the one who's coming or not? When you get on with the program.

And it appears that a full understanding even of what salvation was, was probably not immediately understood or grasped by the disciples. And who Jesus was, the exact relation of Jesus to the Father, now we understand as a result of some of the controversies and the creeds that were developed in later years, we understand that Jesus is part of what sometimes is called the Godhead. Kind of a strange word, but it's found in the King James Version of the Bible, and I guess it's a good word.

It's just, I guess that composite that we call God, which is made up of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and yet only one God, not three. Now, I'm not sure anyone today ever can really profess to understand that. And we have the advantage of having

had creeds for 1600 years that profess to put that into intelligible language.

Before those creeds existed, there's not even any reason to believe that the intelligible language had been offered yet. And it's hard to say that every Christian had a thoroughgoing understanding of what we now call the Trinity. They may have believed essentially in all the basic elements, but I think that even when Jesus was on earth, a lot of the people who followed him probably didn't know, they certainly didn't have a highly complex understanding of his deity.

For example, the woman at the well, initially she calls him Sir. When he tells her things she didn't think he could possibly know, she says, oh, I perceive you're a prophet. But as he goes on, he identifies himself as the Messiah to her.

And she runs off and tells all the people in town, he's the Messiah. And they all come and believe, too, and they all believe he's the Messiah sent from God. Do they believe he's God in the flesh? Probably not.

I don't know if that was ever part of their understanding. Now, he was, but they may not have understood that fully. They did believe he was the Messiah, and we have reason to believe that had they died that night, having thrown in their lot with him and endorsed him and said, we're on your side, we believe in you, in all likelihood they would have gone to heaven.

The disciples, too, it's hard to know exactly all they knew. Now, Peter, Jesus seemed to be relieved when Peter, late in Jesus' ministry, confessed when Jesus said, who do you say I am? Peter said, you're the Christ, or the Messiah, the Son of the living God. And Jesus said, well, blessed are you, Simon Barger, flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father which is in heaven.

Now, the statement that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, we all agree with, of course, and it's true, but we would be concerned about, let's say a group like the Jehovah's Witnesses, who would also say that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. But to them, that statement doesn't have the same theological content it does to us. Because to us, the Son of God, when applied to Jesus, means part of the Godhead, himself fully God, as well as fully man, himself an object of worship.

Now, it may be that not everybody here sees Jesus that way, but that is the way that Orthodox Christianity has defined him from the days of the Nicene Creed, which we're going to have something to say about tonight. What I'm saying, though, is that with the development of these theological creeds and the councils that put them together, we have had an increasingly minutely defined definition of what is regarded to be orthodox or not orthodox. Now, this lecture is called Defining Orthodoxy.

You might say, well, yeah, what is orthodoxy? Well, I'll give you a definition of it. That's

not what I mean by the title Defining Orthodoxy. But a dictionary definition of the word orthodoxy comes from two words.

One means right or correct, and the other means opinion. So, orthodoxy literally means having a correct opinion. Now, it usually is used in common English, including in religious circles, to mean having the officially approved opinion.

And it might be a right one, too. I mean, that opinion which is officially approved by the powers that be may be the correct opinion. But what I'm saying is, for better or for worse, the term orthodoxy has come to be applied to whatever opinion is standard, whatever opinion is recognized by those who are themselves recognized as being the head honchos of the religious organization.

And we're going to be looking tonight at how certain doctrines and certain understandings, theological systems and so forth, came to be approved by the official leadership of that institutional church. I'm not going to argue that there was anything wrong with these views. As a matter of fact, as near as I can tell, I think the church in most cases made the right decision in these controversies, and I'd have to stand on the side of the councils.

But what I'm more concerned about is not so much that they came up with the right or the wrong view, although that does concern me. It would concern me, I guess, if they had come up with a view I consider to be wrong, and that had become the established norm for Christianity. For example, if the Jehovah's Witnesses' view was right, and we've always officially believed something different, I wouldn't be very happy about that.

But my concern is what was really going on, sort of a spiritual transition during this time, that Christianity, which was originally in the days of Christ the Apostles, a moving of the heart toward a profound loyalty to Jesus Christ, a recognition of him as Lord, personal Lord, not just abstract, the Lord, like, I mean, almost every pagan when they pray, they say, Lord, you know, I mean, they think of Lord as sort of a title for whoever's out there, but to the Christian, the word Lord means my master, my leader, the one that I am committed to, the one I am following. I mean, that basic commitment, that basic humbling of oneself, and saying, I will not be my Lord, you will be my Lord, I will deny myself, I will take up my cross and follow you, that's what constituted being a disciple of Christ or a Christian in those days. By the end of the period we're talking about tonight, Christianity was defined in very different terms.

It was defined in terms of what we'd have to call confessionalism. If a person confessed to the right formulation of words, if they confessed to believe the creeds, they were now regarded to be Christian. Now, you might say, well, shouldn't people, before we regard them to be Christian, shouldn't they make some kind of a confession? Doesn't the Bible say if you will confess with your mouth, and if you believe in your heart, then you'll be saved? Yes, absolutely.

But what is it you must confess with your mouth? If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you'll be saved. That's a fairly simple creed. Jesus is Lord.

God raised him from the dead. Now, am I suggesting that the details worked out in these creeds are somehow disagreeable to my understanding of Jesus? Not so. That's not what I'm suggesting.

What I'm concerned about is that prior to these councils that met and established these creeds, a person might be regarded as a true Christian, and probably validly so, even though they did not hold the views which later came to be expressed in the creeds. Because, as I said, I would be very interested in somebody showing me some evidence that the disciples in the days of Jesus had a concept of the Trinity. If they did, there's no record of it, and it would be an amazing thing if they did, because the Jews had no concept of it, and they came out of Judaism.

Maybe they had it by direct revelation, but we're not told anywhere that they did. We're only told, say, because Jesus was their Lord. Now, a person could argue that with the coming of the creeds and the official recognition of the creeds by the established church, the definition of what it takes to be a true Christian was legitimately made more specific.

After all, didn't Jesus say to his disciples in John 16, 12, I have many things to say to you, but you're not yet able to bear them. But when the Holy Spirit comes, he will lead you into all truth. Don't most of us believe, I do, that after Jesus left, the disciples still had to learn many things and had to hammer out some controversies.

Jesus, for example, never talked about whether a Gentile convert had to be circumcised or not, but that became a big controversy in the early church, and the apostles had to decide that at a council. And if the Jerusalem council, they did make a decision. Gentiles don't have to be circumcised.

Jesus had never addressed the subject. One of those many things that Jesus had not addressed. Couldn't someone extrapolate from that, well, that later church councils then had the same force of authority equivalent to that of the apostolic council at Jerusalem? Well, your answer to that question will pretty much determine whether you're more suited for Roman Catholicism or for Protestantism.

Because one of the basic differences of opinion among that sector of the church that is called Roman Catholicism and that sector which is called Protestant is that the Roman Catholic church officially says yes, these councils were every bit as authoritative as that Jerusalem council. It's not so much that they taught anything contrary to what Jesus said, or that they defined Christianity in different terms than what Jesus did. It's rather that they put a finer point on it, that they narrowed it down to a more accurate, a more comprehensive understanding.

And that because these creeds were written by official gatherings of the official leaders of the official church, they are binding on all who would call themselves Christians. And we would then be inclined to say anybody who rejects these creeds is rejecting as it were Christ himself. And there was a time, the Roman Catholic church doesn't take this attitude anymore, they still have it in their literature, but it's not in the attitude of their priests and their representatives.

There used to be a time when the Catholics made it very clear, if you do not agree with the Popes and their opinions and the councils and what they decide on these things, you are anathema, which means cursed to the lowest hell. And if anyone thinks, oh, I can't imagine those nice Catholic people who live next door to me thinking that way, you don't have to read very far back into history, like in the days of the Reformation. And the Council of Trent, which was a Catholic council to launch a counter-Reformation, I mean, they said in that council, if anyone says that we are saved by faith alone and not by works, let him be anathema.

If anybody says that the Eucharist does not become the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ, let him be anathema. And so far, they went through a lot of very specific doctrinal things. And a person was anathema if he didn't agree with the official credo, with the official orthodoxy of the Roman Church.

Now, the Protestant Church has made the same mistake, I believe, and probably because much controversy leads to much polarization. And back in Jesus' day, they weren't debating over whether Jesus was very God of very God and very man of very man or not. I mean, that kind of language would have sounded kind of silly to them back then.

What does very God of very God even mean? I'm not sure it sounds all that reasonable to me to use that terminology. It must mean something, but it certainly was an emphasis of one of the creeds. And the reason they didn't discuss it and didn't polarize that is it wasn't really controversial.

They weren't thinking of those subjects. But as time went by, wrong ideas about Christ circulated within the church among people who actually held positions of bishop and elder and so forth in the churches. And these views were very different from what were believed to be what the Bible taught by the ruling orthodoxy.

And yet, some of these aberrations had tremendous following and made arguments that were convincing to a large number of people so that whole churches in whole countries were swayed over to these other views. So that councils were called and decisions were made about which side would be condemned and which side would be vindicated. And once that decision was made, it was put into writing with the imprimatur usually of the emperor himself, who was also a professing Christian usually.

And from that day on, whoever believed what side A said, which was condemned at the council, that person was a heretic, an anathema. And whoever believed what he had argued, which happened to be endorsed by the emperor and by the council, that person was orthodox, had correct opinions. Now, even though the Protestant churches have officially stood against the Catholic notion that the decisions of councils, the traditions which are formed by the agreement of the College of Bishops and so forth, that these do not hold canonical authority like the Bible does.

Yet, although Protestants say that, they do really the same thing in their own denominations because almost every denomination, whether it's the Lutherans that came out of the Reformation or the Presbyterians or whether it's the Anglican or whatever, you name it, Baptist, Anabaptist, whatever, each denomination arose out of a time of disagreement. And disagreement almost always bred some controversy. And in an environment of controversy, people polarized more.

People who wouldn't have been quite so offended by this viewpoint begin to define themselves in terms of their opposition to this viewpoint. They might not have agreed with it previously, but when it becomes a controversy, they have to take sides. And by taking sides, they have to choose loyalties.

And once they choose loyalties, they actually have to distance themselves from the side that their loyalty is against until you have a polarization and people divide off into different denominations and so forth. And this happens as much among Protestants, probably more among Protestants, than it has happened among the Catholics. And you'll find once these denominations form, they have their own orthodoxy.

And what is the orthodoxy? So many of them, because they're Protestants, say, well, we don't have any creed, just the Bible. Yeah, well, really, of course, the Catholics would sort of say that, too. The thing is, some of the Jehovah's Witnesses say that.

In fact, they say it very emphatically. We have no creed. We have no doctrine, just the Bible.

But obviously, they have doctrines and we have doctrines and every denomination has doctrines. And they all believe it's from the Bible, which means that there is apparently room for disagreement about some things. If you really want to honor the Scripture, there's room for disagreement about some things.

In my opinion, I'll give you my assessment of what we're going to study before I actually go over the details of it. In my opinion, the Church took kind of a wrong turn. Now, of course, the Church doesn't care what my opinion is anyway, and I'm not saying they have to.

I don't think my opinion has any more value than anyone else's. I'll just give you my

opinion. I think that the Church began to try to play the Holy Spirit.

I think the leaders began to try to play the Holy Spirit. Now, if we take the Catholic view, that every time the Church officially met on something and made a final decision, that was the Holy Spirit. That was the fulfillment of Jesus saying, when the Holy Spirit comes, he will lead you into all truth.

And if the Catholic view is correct, then we have to say, well, the Church had every right to play the Holy Spirit. And whatever they decided is right. But if you can take that view, you should be a Catholic and not something else.

If you're going to be a Protestant, it's because your basic premise is, Jesus and the Apostles had an authority that has not been equaled by any Church leaders since. And the scriptures they wrote are an authoritative word from God that is superior in authority to anything any group of men could ever write or decide on. I mean, these are the basic differences.

Now, I mean, some might say, well, can you prove your Protestant position? Probably. I'm not going to bother to do so right now. All I'm going to say is that I don't hold the Catholic position right now.

And if you think that creeds are a good way to define Christianity, the creeds of the Councils, then probably you would be happier in the Catholic Church because you wouldn't have to be inconsistent there. Protestants are supposed to believe that the Bible alone is God's final authority and final word on things. And even creeds, if they disagree with the Bible, are to be rejected because the men who came up with the creeds were fallible men, too.

And sometimes a whole generation of Christians can be fallible. If they happen to be the generation that formed one of the creeds, that's not too good. If you study Church history, as you will if you keep coming here, you'll find that during what we call the Middle Ages, sometimes called the Dark Ages, there was a whole lengthy period of centuries during which time it's hard to imagine that any of the popes were real saved people.

Now, I believe some of the early popes were genuine Christians and I think maybe some of the more recent popes might be saved. I'm not their judge and that's between them and God. All I'm saying is I'm not ruling it out.

I'm not sure how a saved man who loves Jesus could be a pope judging from the kinds of claims that go along with that office. It doesn't seem... I don't know. But all I'm saying is I'm not going to make the decision about who can be saved and who can't.

But I'll tell you what, there's some popes in the Middle Ages that no one, even the Catholics, wouldn't argue that they were saved. I mean, there was a pope that was a

woman dressed like a man, impersonating a man. There was a pope who was... and she was a harlot.

She and her daughter had paramours. They had male lovers in the Vatican with them. There was a male pope who was killed by the jealous husband of a woman while he was in the act of adultery with the woman.

I mean, this happened a great deal in the Dark Ages. There was a period of time particularly, a certain succession of popes that church historians, including the Catholics, call the reign of the harlots. Now, I'm not saying that every pope has been like that.

What I'm saying to you is we need to be aware that just because people are in the highest offices in the church doesn't mean that they're really Christians. Sometimes they may be, sometimes they may not be. And if they are not and they happen to have a council and decide on what's orthodox and the rest of the church feels like they have to follow it because this group of people who have some political office has said so, then the church is in trouble.

And that's, I believe, one reason why the Catholic church got into tremendous trouble because they did believe that. And insofar as Protestants make the same mistake with their esteemed leaders, I believe the Apostle Church gets in trouble too. Now, essentially, my thesis tonight is that before this time that we're going to be considering tonight, Christianity was largely defined although even a little earlier than this the change began to happen, but originally Christianity was defined as confessing that Jesus is Lord, believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, and being so sincere about that that you lived like that was true.

You got baptized when you made that confession and you joined yourself to all others the world over who had the same confession. Quite simple. It's very easy.

I shouldn't say easy, it was quite simple. Easy and simple are not the same thing. A thing can be easy, but complex.

A thing can also be simple, but difficult. Simple just means not complex. Christianity was a simple faith, I believe.

It became very complex. And while I don't really care to take issue with the details of that complexity, it's the whole trend toward the complexity of definition that I have a problem with. Because I believe that certain individuals who love Jesus and would well have been regarded as His disciples when He was alive and when the apostles were alive, came to be regarded as heretics simply because they found themselves on the wrong side of a council's decision about what they called orthodoxy.

And even if I agree that what the council decided on was true, that doesn't mean I have to agree that the persons who disagree with it are damned. There's a lot of Christians

today that believe a lot of things I don't think are true, but I don't have to believe they're damned. And if among the 12 apostles when Jesus was alive, if there was one of them that thought He was a created being, and another who said, no, He's the very God of very God, and one that said, no, He's got two natures, and one that said, no, He's got one nature, and one said, well, He's got two natures, but the one nature is absorbed in the other nature like a drop of wine in the ocean.

These are the kinds of things that were discussed in the councils. And how many angels can dance on the head of a pin in their spare time? And if there were different disciples who had these different opinions, it never became an issue because it didn't have to become an issue. A comprehensive understanding of the mystery of the Godhead or of the mystery of the Incarnation never was made a test of fellowship by Jesus Christ or by the apostles or by any biblical writer.

I say comprehensive. Certainly there was a test of truth in what people believed about Jesus. If anyone did not confess that Jesus came in the flesh, that person was not of God.

That person was of the spirit of Antichrist, said John. If they confessed that Jesus came in the flesh, then they were of God. Pretty easy stuff.

I mean, pretty easy to define stuff. If a person didn't believe in Jesus at all, didn't believe He rose from the dead, didn't believe He was Lord, didn't believe He was the Son of God, didn't believe any of the basic things that were affirmed about Him or which He affirmed about Himself, they couldn't be a Christian, obviously. But among those who could affirm those things, there were no doubt then as there are now a wide variety of opinions about secondary matters of these details.

And Jesus and the apostles never made all of these minutiae of detailed theological orthodoxy a test of being a disciple of His. And as I get older, as I study the Bible more, as I try to divest myself of the grid of my religious upbringing, which is hard to divest yourself of, but I'm working on it for the past 28 years, still not all the way there, but I'm feeling more and more that the church has institutionalized orthodoxy to a point that there are people who are going to be in heaven whom God loves, but the church has put out and wouldn't have because there was some point... Hey, there's people here in this room who were put out of a church because they didn't believe in the preacher of rapture. Can you believe it? I mean, I can hardly believe it.

I mean, even when I was a total believer in the preacher of rapture, if someone ever said someone was put out of the church for not believing in the preacher of rapture, I would have been astonished. And now that I don't believe in the preacher of rapture, I'm even more aghast. But, I mean, this is the degree of pettiness to which Christians have historically been willing to go in defining orthodoxy.

And, of course, the more finely you define it, the more detail is necessary to be on the

right side of it, then the more there is a priest class, an elite class, who alone can be educated thoroughly to know all these details. The average person, especially in the days when there wasn't much literacy or many books around for people to read, the average person didn't have any possibility of familiarizing himself with all the fine points of divinity and theology. And so those who had the training could decide what the rules would be and what direction things would go.

And this became more and more the case that true Christianity was defined in terms of confessionalism, confessing to these creeds, believing the right detailed creed, and not being a follower of Jesus necessarily. And many, many people who can confess the creeds and do every Sunday morning have never met Jesus, many of them. Many of them have never been born again, and many of them have never even been confronted about the need to, because it is considered, if you say that creed, and you mean that creed? You mean that? Do you believe that? Yeah, I guess I do.

Okay, well, then you say it. That's what being a Christian means today to people. But I don't think it means that to God any more than it did when Jesus was here.

And so I want to see how this transition took place. After Constantine's conversion, Christianity, of course, enjoyed a respite permanently from imperial persecutions. Over the previous 200 years before 303 A.D., or 313 more properly, the church had known more or less continuous persecution from the emperors.

But with the conversion of Constantine the emperor, there was never to be such persecution again in the empire. And the church finally, you know, kind of came out of its foxhole and looked around and saw that the dust had settled and wasn't sure if it was true. It could hardly be true.

And yet they found it was true. There was no more bullets flying at them. There were no more lions waiting for them in the arenas.

And they began to dust themselves off and say, well, hey, I could get used to this. And they did, real quick. And getting used to it means they had the luxury to sit around and debate theology.

Something you really never get around to doing while you're at the stake being burned or waiting for your turn. But now that there was, you know, none of that to have to worry about, they could worry about the fine points of defining orthodoxy, defining what true Christians are supposed to believe and what they're not supposed to believe. Now, I believe, personally, I think everything that Christians are required to believe.

But I believe people can be saved without believing all those things. There's not a whole lot of things that the Bible says you have to believe to be saved. When the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip had their conversation in the chariot out in the desert, the eunuch

said, here's some water.

What hinders me from being baptized? Philip said, well, if you believe that Jesus is the Son of God with all your heart. And the guy said, I believe that Jesus is the Son of God with all your heart. Philip said, well, there you go.

You know, baptize him. He didn't take him through a new converts class or a catechism or anything like that. He just, the guy had the right confession.

The only one required at the time. Now, that changed because when the church got around to thinking hard about theology, of course, as would be predictable, not everyone had the same thoughts. As everyone applies themselves to think analytically and carefully about mysterious and lofty, ethereal things, some of which are beyond our ken, some of which are simply inaccessible, they're likely to reach different conclusions.

That's why there's so many denominations today. The only problem is they weren't allowed to have different denominations back then. They had to, everyone had to agree.

And this was the first basic assumption was that if part of the empire believed one way and the other part of the empire believed another way, that that must necessarily divide the church. And the only reason that would be true is if the church was an organization or an institution. When you have an institution of man, you need to have total lockstep agreement as much as possible.

And any disagreement threatens the solidarity of the institution. But if the church is defined as those who love Jesus Christ, He is their Lord, they believe He's the Son of God, that He died for their sins, that He rose again, that they're committed to following Him, they love one another, they have the Holy Spirit, then the Holy Spirit is the one who's really in charge of teaching. Remember John said in 1 John chapter four I think it is, he says you have no, chapter two, you have no need that anyone teach you.

But as that anointing which is in you guides you into all truth, you shall abide in Him. Now some might think it's rather hypocritical for me to use that scripture to say that it's not necessary for people to listen to the teachings of bishops and popes and things like that when in fact I'm a teacher myself. Someone could easily say, well Steve, you're a teacher, I guess you're saying we don't need you.

That's exactly what I'm saying, you don't need me. And whenever it thinks you need me, run away as fast as you can because I'm not going to be here forever. Only Jesus is going to be with you forever.

Only the Holy Spirit will be with you forever. If you begin to need some man, then you have begun to drift from what Christianity is. Now, I mean, at one level, we need people, that is if we're going to accomplish something together.

Paul said that the church is like a body and that I cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you. And the head cannot say to the foot, I have no need of you. It depends on what we call need.

If it means to fulfill all the functions of the body of Christ requires a total diversity of gifts, then of course, in order to accomplish that purpose, we do need each other. We are not fully independent. But when it comes to being saved and knowing Jesus Christ and having a relationship with God, you'd better not need anyone else for that.

There's one God and one mediator between God and man, himself and man, Jesus Christ. And you don't need anyone else standing between you and him to make that work. Once you understand that, you can work in concert with others who have the same relationship with Jesus Christ or same kind of relationship, even if their views are very different than yours.

But you can just see that as different gifting. You know, the eye and the ear don't perceive the world the same way. They don't have to.

They each bring their own contribution. And the whole body is enriched by the variety of contributions. But see, when the church is an institution, you've got to have someone in control.

You've got to have a man or a group of men who say, this is what we stand for, this is what we all believe in, every down to the finest detail. And when someone arrives over here who starts to say something different in a convincing way, you've got to put them down real hard or else they might convince someone that they're right. Well, I think the fact that what happened in this period of the creeds happened is simply a symptom.

I don't think the creeds are bad in themselves. I think they're symptomatic of a mentality that had come about in the church that had not been there originally. And that is that we need to institutionalize this, we need to standardize it, we need to make sure that everyone believes just the same thing.

And if they don't, they're a threat. And they have to be banished from the empire, condemned, anathematized, maybe even burned at the stake. Now this is the mentality that arose.

Now I've given you some notes about it. When the church began to think about theology and people had different opinions, there began to be a lot of interest in arguments and debates over such opinions. And one of the early bishops of Constantinople in the early 4th century, about the time before the Nicene Creed, made this comment.

He's describing the spiritual environment in Constantinople in his day. He said, If in this city you ask anyone for change, he will discuss with you whether God the Son is begotten or unbegotten. If you ask about the quality of bread, you will receive the

answer that God the Father is greater, God the Son is less.

If you suggest that a bath is desirable, you will be told that there is nothing before the Son was created. In other words, you could start a conversation on any subject and it would quickly turn around to these theological controversies that were on everybody's mind in those days. One of the most important that is alluded to in that quote was that which originated with a man named Arius.

Now Arius wasn't someone who started a cult. Although his views on Jesus and his views on God are essentially identical to those of a group that we now would call a cult, or any group that held his views today we would call them a cult. The Jehovah's Witnesses believe in Arianism today.

But in 318, Arius was not the founder of a cult. He was the elder of a church, the Church of Alexandria, the same church that Origen and Clement and others had been in, and many other good men after that. He was just one of the elders there.

But he had trouble accepting the Trinitarian notion of God. Now I have personally, just some autobiographical information here, I have personally never had trouble accepting the Trinitarian view of God. I've known many people who really have trouble with it.

I would have to say I've had much trouble trying to understand the Trinitarian idea of God. In fact, I wouldn't say that I understand it now. I've had extreme difficulty trying to explain the Trinitarian understanding of God.

But I've never had any personal problems accepting it. I was conditioned from childhood, I guess, to believe that if God said it, it's true. And if I don't understand it, it's just as true as if I did.

My understanding or not understanding does not contribute to its truthfulness or diminish from it. And therefore, although I've never understood the Trinity doctrine, I have always believed that this is what the Bible teaches, and I still believe it. And for that reason, I have never had a problem accepting it.

There are always people, always have been people, who've had a harder time than I have, and maybe you're one of them. Arius was one of them. Now, it wasn't that he was looking to pick a fight with the Church, as near as I can tell.

It's not that he was looking to start a cult. It's rather that he was concerned, since the Trinitarian doctrine had never really been defined as orthodoxy, he was concerned that it might not be true, and that it seemed to fly in the face of the monotheism that is at the core of both of Judaism and Christianity. Judaism and Christianity are distinctively monotheistic religious systems.

I mean, there's one God, not more than one God. All pagan religions at that time

believed in multiple gods. There was another pagan religion that arose later on that believed in one god, and that was Islam, but it wasn't around in these days.

And so, belief in more than one god was distinctively regarded a pagan view, whereas Christianity and Judaism affirmed adamantly that God is one, and not two, three, four, five, or ten. Now, Arius felt that believing that Jesus and the Father were both God, although there were certainly some differences between them, suggested there's two gods. And I'm sure you've heard people raise that objection, too.

It's a hard thing for people to shake off. Apparently, Arius never shook it off, personally. He believed that in order to maintain the individuality of Christ as a separate person from the Father, and monotheism, too, you would have to sacrifice the deity of one or the other.

No one would sacrifice the deity of the Father, so he felt that the deity of Christ had to be challenged. A deity, we mean that he is God. We don't just mean he's somehow in some vague way divine, but deity means he is God.

The deity of Christ's doctrine is that Jesus is God. And not in the way that New Age people say we're all God, but in the specific way that Christians and Jews believe that there is a God, a creator, a supreme governor and ruler and father of all, that Jesus is God in that sense. But how do you have that so? How can Jesus be the Father? I mean, how can the Father be God and Jesus be God and there not be two Gods? Well, that's the problem Arius had.

That's the problem that Jehovah's Witnesses wrestle with to this day, and a lot of other people decide. I don't wrestle with it. I believe Jesus is God.

I don't have a problem with that. But that is a problem for many people. Arius was one of them.

So Arius began to teach that Jesus was a created being the first and most supreme of all created beings, that he was the created being through whom the Father created all other things, so that Jesus held an exalted position before coming to earth as a man that he was a pre-existing being, the first and foremost of God's creation, the loftiest, rightfully called the Son of God, because God had, as they felt, as Arius thought, had made him first, and therefore just as Adam is called the Son of God because God created him, so they believe that Christ was the Son of God because God created him. Now, to this very day, Jehovah's Witnesses teach this same thing, and I'm sure many of us who have had to lock horns with those people have seen the scriptures that they usually bring up. One thing that they point out, or they say, is that Jesus never claimed to be God the Son, but he did say he was the Son of God, but one would not immediately assume from the title Son of God that the person is claiming to be God himself.

So they say, but the Jews did assume that. The Jews did assume that claiming to be the Son of God was the same thing as being equal with God or claiming equality with God. That's why they took up stones to stone him.

In John chapter 5, and verse 17, and 18. In John 5, 17, 18, Jesus answered them, My Father has been working until now, and I have been working. Therefore, the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was his Father, making himself equal with God.

Now, you might say, well, if someone told me that God was his Father, I wouldn't think he was making himself equal with God. Well, maybe you wouldn't be understanding. I mean, those people were listening to him.

They knew the import of what Jesus said, and Jesus never came out and said, by the way, you're misunderstanding what I'm saying here. When Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, those who listened very commonly believed that he was saying that he was equal with God. Over in John chapter 10, they make this clear also.

In John chapter 10, in verse 30, Jesus said, I and my Father are one. Then the Jews took up stones again to stone him, and Jesus answered them, In many good works have I shown you from my Father. For which of these works do you stone me? The Jews answered and said, Same.

For a good work we do not stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God. So, they understood that Jesus was making himself God, making himself equal with God by calling God his Father in the particular way that he used that term. Now, I can call God my Father.

God is only my Father because I am in Christ, and God is Christ's Father. I and all Christians are in Christ, and as such, share in the privilege of sonship. We receive the spirit of adoption.

The spirit of Christ is in us because we are seen in Him. And we enjoy His sonship by extension, by being in Him. Not by some inherent right, because we are not born in this world as sons of God.

The Bible says, to as many as received Him, to them He gave the power to become the sons of God, even to as many as believed in His name in John 1.12. So, I am a son of God, not by nature, not innately, not by virtue of my individual personhood. I am truly a son of God because I am in Christ, the Son, and I enjoy sonship as being part of Him. At least that's how I understand the Scriptures.

But Jesus made it as though He was innately and uniquely the Son of God. And they understood Him to mean that. And they wanted to kill Him for saying that.

Well, another Scripture that the Arians use is John 14, verse 28, where Jesus was talking to His disciples in the upper room. He said, You have heard Me say to you, I am going away and coming back to you. If you love Me, you would rejoice because I said, I am going to the Father, for My Father is greater than I. Now, Jesus said, My Father is greater than I. The Jehovah's Witnesses today and the Arians in the 4th century, they said, How could Jesus make it plainer? He is subordinate to the Father.

He is less than the Father. The Father is more than He is. He is not equal to the Father.

However, the use of this verse to make this point is not exactly taking things in context. Because in the same chapter earlier, we have one of Jesus' disciples in verse 8 saying, Philip said to Him, Lord, show us the Father and it is sufficient for us. And Jesus said to him, Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father.

So how can you say, Show us the Father? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in Me? The words I speak to you, I do not speak on My own authority, but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves. Now, Philip says, Show us the Father and we will be satisfied.

If you said that to me, if some unbeliever said to me, Listen, Steve, you are telling me there is a God. I haven't seen this God. Just show me this God.

Show me God and I will be satisfied. What would you think of me? I would say, Well, if you have seen Me, you have seen God. You don't know who I am? You have been so long with me and you don't know who you are talking to? You are asking to see God and you have already seen Me.

What more do you want? I mean, if I said something like that, it would be audacious because I would be making an extravagant claim upon myself and you would recognize that. Jesus wasn't just saying, Well, God is a lot like Me and if you see Me, then you have got a pretty good idea of what God is a lot like. He didn't say that.

Philip asked to see the Father. Jesus could have said, Well, you know, I mean, if He felt differently about it than He did, He could have said, Well, you know, I can understand how you would like to see the Father. I mean, Moses wanted to see the face of God too, but he was told no one could see God's face and live.

And I am sorry, I can't show you the Father in that sense. God cannot be seen by the eye of man without consuming Him and therefore, I am just going to have to disappoint you about that, but I will say this as a consolation. God is a great deal like Me and if you see Me, you will get a good idea of what God is like.

But Jesus didn't say anything like that. He said, You want to see the Father? Who do you

think you are looking at? Don't you know who I am? If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father. I mean, that is a claim of enormous magnitude.

And then later in the chapter, He says, The Father is greater than I. But why? What does that mean? Well, I believe all evangelicals, including those who believe in the Trinity, which is virtually all evangelicals, I think, believe in the Trinity. I believe they would all agree with what I say, that Jesus here, when He was on earth, had subjected Himself to His Father for a unique, limited period, that He became a man so that He might be subject to death. He became a human being under the authority of the Father in a special sense that He did not possess beforehand.

Now, maybe some evangelicals wouldn't agree with that, but that's how I've always understood it. And I think that when Jesus says, The Father is greater than I, Jesus is describing Himself in His present earthly humiliation. Yeah, God doesn't have to be like me right now.

He doesn't have to be sitting in this stinking room sweating up a storm, eating stale bread, and smelling you disciples and washing your feet. I mean, yeah, the Father is not in my position right now. He is in a greater position.

You should be glad that I said I'm going back there because that's better than here. He's better off than I am. He's greater than I am in that sense.

I'm in my humbled state. I'm in my limited state. God is everywhere at once.

I'm stuck right here in one place. The Father knows everything, but there's things I don't know. The Father can do anything He wants to, but I can only do what He tells me to do.

I mean, in this state, I'm definitely His subordinate. But that does not address the question. It may to some people's minds, but it certainly does not necessarily address the question of whether Jesus was, in fact, very God come in the human flesh.

It is certainly a possibility, and Christians believe it is true, that when God became a man, that man, that new condition, was a condition of brief subordination for the sake of suffering death and laying down his life as a ransom for men. But that doesn't change the fact that that person who was subordinate was innately God come in a human form. So, I mean, you can see how there'd be disputes about this.

There still are. These disputes were not ended in the days of Arius. These verses have been taken various ways.

Let me show you a couple other verses that are often used to promote the Arian position. Colossians chapter 1 says of Jesus in Colossians 1:15 that He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. Now, you might have a translation like I do that says firstborn over all creation.

I believe you'll find in the Greek it says the firstborn of all creation, but the reason some translators have changed it to the firstborn over all creation is because they don't like the sound of the way it was written, the firstborn of all creation. Because Arius and Arians have always believed that the firstborn of all creation means that Jesus was the first created thing, the first part of creation to be created. And if that is what that statement means, then Arius was right.

Now, evangelicals do not believe that that is what this means, but not all are agreed as to what it does mean. Some believe it means that firstborn is not so much a reference to really being the firstborn, but simply is taken like a title of status, that the firstborn of a family was the ruler of the family. And to say that Jesus was the firstborn of all creation would simply mean he's the ruler of all creation, not saying that he is himself a part of it.

This is how most evangelicals have understood it, and the translators, for example, of the New King James and several other translations, in order to put that idea across, have translated he's the firstborn over all creation, so as to eliminate the appearance that he is part of the creation himself. However, I have no problem with the original reading, firstborn of all creation. I don't believe that that says he's part of the creation.

As a matter of fact, I don't think it's talking about his origin at all, because three verses later, it's still talking about Jesus, and it says, and he is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead. And in all things, he may have preeminence. Now, Jesus is the firstborn.

In what sense? Was Jesus born somewhere back in the eternity past? Well, many people think so. I don't know anywhere in the Bible that would say such a thing, but we know this, that Paul said he was the firstborn from the dead. What's he referring to there? He's referring to Jesus' resurrection.

He's called the firstborn from the dead, because the rest of us are going to be born from the dead in the same way when he comes back. In another place, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, calls Jesus the one who rose from the dead as the firstfruits of those who slept, meaning the rest are going to rise too in the general harvest. Firstfruits are the first part harvested.

The rest of the harvest is going to follow later. Jesus' resurrection was the first of many. Paul says in Adam all died, and in Christ shall every man be made alive, but each in his own order.

Christ the firstfruits, afterwards those who are his at his coming. So, to say that Jesus was the firstfruits of those who slept or the firstborn of the dead simply is emphasizing that in his resurrection he simply was the forerunner of the rest of us. We will be resurrected too.

Now, to say he's the firstborn of all creation suggests that the whole of creation will undergo resurrection, and he's the first to do so. In his resurrection, he was the first to experience this resurrection. The rest of creation will also experience such a renovation according to Paul and Peter.

Paul in Romans 8, Peter in 2 Peter 3. And for that reason, to say he's the firstborn of all creation doesn't mean he originated before all other created things originated. I believe in the context it's saying he came back from the dead took on his glorified form before any of the rest of creation did or will. But the rest of creation will later.

He's simply the firstborn of that class. But it doesn't mean that he was created originally. At least that's how I... You can see it any number of ways, but that just points out that you don't have to see it the way the Arians do.

And if the Arian understanding conflicts with the rest of Scripture, as I believe it does, then some alternative to the Arian understanding is to be preferred, especially when several possible understandings are options to you. One other Scripture I want to show you that the Arians used to make the point that Jesus is a created being is Revelation 3.14. Jesus is the speaker here. In Revelation 3.14, he says, To the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, These things says the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God.

Now, Jesus describes himself here as the beginning of the creation of God. Again, this sounds as if he is saying when God began to create, the first thing he created was Jesus. And then he created the rest.

And he was the beginning of the creation of God. But, once again, we have more than one possible meaning here. The word beginning here is arche, which... arche... You might be familiar with it as a prefix to some other words like archangel or arch... arch heretic or arch criminal or whatever.

Arche is the Greek word. It means supreme or the first or something... speaking of status. Or it can mean, as the lexicon say, the source or the originator of.

Most evangelicals believe that when Jesus said he is the beginning of the creation of God, that doesn't mean he is the first thing created, but that he began the creation. He originated. He is the active source of the creation.

He is, in other words, the creator or the one through whom it was created, not part of it. Now, the phrase as we have in our English Bibles maybe doesn't incline us to see it that way. But the Greek word allows it and the translations may be obscuring something rather than clarifying in some cases.

And I believe that is often the case. In any case, these are some of the verses that are difficult. And the Arians felt that they taught that Jesus is a created being and we might

as well stop this impossible errand of trying to make there be two persons in one Godhead and be one God.

It is much easier. Just take it for what it says. God is God.

Jesus is the Son of God. Now, there is a certain appeal to this, but the problem is it simply doesn't account for all the data of Scripture. In fact, it goes right against the majority of the data of Scripture.

It requires for those who want to be consistent in their Arianism that the Bible be retranslated in many places in order to accommodate this view. And the Jehovah's Witness publication, the New World Translation of the Scriptures, which is the Jehovah's Witness Bible, is a good example of how one needs to artificially retranslate a great number of verses of the Bible in order to accommodate this position. You have to add articles where articles don't exist in the text.

You have to add prepositions where prepositions don't exist. You have to add the word other in passages where other isn't found. I mean, the JW Bible is a study in itself, just all the ways that they've altered and twisted and manipulated the text because the Bible as it stands does not teach Arianism.

And there are a few verses, like the ones we looked at, that seen one way, they look like they could teach that, but that's not the only way to see them. And if you do take those few verses that way, you put yourself at odds with the whole testimony of the rest of Scripture. And that is why Arius was not believed by many Christians.

Now, some Christians did believe him. Could they no longer be Christians? Well, I have to let God be the judge of that, but I'm not sure that we would have to say that they couldn't be Christians. This was a time where this was still up for grabs.

This was still being discussed. No one had really maybe thought it all through. Can a person be mistaken about a thing like that and still love Jesus, still believe he is the Lord? Can they? It's not a trick question.

It's just a hard one to answer. I believe that when Jesus was on earth, some of the disciples might not have given the right answer if asked a question about that because I don't know that they had a very highly developed Christology. I don't know that they'd thought about it that much.

And I don't know that they were required to. That's the point. Jesus never sat down and said, now listen guys, now that you're my disciples, you've got to get this thing really straight.

I realize it's hard to understand, but I want to make sure you understand it. Or if you don't understand it, I want to at least make sure you know it. I am God.

And God exists in three persons, but one in essence. Got that? Good. Jesus didn't ever do that.

And I'm not trying to be irreverent. He never said anything that even came close to resembling that kind of a discussion. He did say that he was God.

He did affirm that on occasion. I'm not denying that. He just never explained how that fact dovetails with the idea that there's only one God and the Father was someone different than him, but he's God too.

He never explained that mystery. It would appear that Jesus never required them to know that. Now, am I saying it's not a true doctrine? No, I believe it is a true doctrine.

And I'm awfully glad to have the information. I'm glad to know more than the disciples were required to know. But that's a different question than saying would I have to believe the correct thing about this necessarily to be saved, to be a follower of Jesus.

Everyone must make his own decision, but the council made theirs. There were some powerful men who opposed Arius in this situation. One was his own bishop in Alexandria whose name happened to be Alexander.

But more importantly, was an assistant to the bishop, the archdeacon of the church, whose name was Athanasius. He became the real hero of this period for orthodoxy. He asserted and argued and had a great command of scripture to make his point that Jesus and the Father were of the same essence and that Christ never was created, that he was eternal and was co-eternal with the Father.

Now this was, of course, exactly opposite of what Arius said on these same points. And so great contention arose. Arius had his followers.

Athanasius had his followers. Whole sectors of the church began to divide over this question, over Arianism versus Athanasianism. And really the emperor Constantine is the one who decided this has to be fixed.

This controversy can't go on. So the emperor Constantine in 320... Well, I'm getting ahead of myself here. There was a synod in the church of Alexandria to try to settle the question.

And it did. It deposed Arius of his position. In 321, this is four years before the Nicene Council, his own church synod deposed him of his position as an elder in the church.

But that didn't prevent his doctrines from continuing to be believed. There were many church leaders in the Eastern church especially that believed Arius was right. And so the empire was being divided over this.

And so Constantine said we've got to have a council about this. He called 300 bishops to

Nicaea. And a number of other churchmen came too, but 300 bishops were there.

And debates were launched and heard. And I don't know how long this council went on, but days. At one point, it appeared that Arius was going to win the day and the council was going to support his position.

If that had happened, then there's a good possibility we would all be Jehovah's Witnesses today because the church would have decided that Arius was right and the Jehovah's Witnesses believe he was right. But as it turned out, during one of the intermissions in the debate or whatever, Athanasius seemed to be standing alone against Arius. Everyone else seemed to be swayed by Arius' arguments.

And one of Athanasius' friends said, Athanasius, it looks like the whole world is against you. And he said, well, then Athanasius is against the world. And he went back into the debate and he gave it all he had and eventually he began to sway the group.

And eventually the whole council decided Athanasius is right, Arius is wrong. And Constantine decided that was true also. Tremendous spiritual giant that he was and a great one to be deciding church doctrines.

But they decided that Athanasius had a more correct view of Christ than Arius did. And so Arius was condemned and banished. Now, that was not the end of Arianism by any means.

They did draw up a creed called the Nicene Creed at that council. And in that creed they said that Christ is of the same essence as the Father. He's the only begotten of the Father, very God of very God, which I guess means nothing less than God.

It's a different, strange construction of words. And this view has basically been considered the orthodox view ever since that time, since 325. And it is certainly considered a test of orthodoxy by almost everyone I know today.

There are some people who define cults by their rejection of the Nicene decision. Walter Martin, for example, when he was alive, the cult expert, wrote a book, *The Kingdom of the Cults*. And although I don't remember him saying this outright, but I think listening to him enough I got the impression that he would decide that a group was a cult or not depending on whether they held to the Nicene formulation.

Well, okay, fortunately for me, I agree with the Nicene formulation. I agree I'm a Trinitarian. I believe Jesus is God.

But I'm not sure that I have biblical authority for saying that belief in that is what determines whether you're cultic or not, especially if we mean cultic means lost. Because I just don't know that the Bible could say that. I know the Bible, or I'm convinced that the Bible teaches a Trinitarian view.

And I am therefore convinced that the Trinitarian view is the correct view. But I don't believe that the Bible anywhere teaches that an understanding or acceptance of that view is part of being saved. If someone finds it in the Bible that says that, I'll be glad to rejoice in that because I believe that doctrine is true.

But this is a hard thing for us to look objectively at after 1,600 years of this. Where in the Bible is the Trinity doctrine ever explained, elaborated on, or made a test of fellowship? I can think of no place in the Bible. And to make it one may just be going... may be a little bit too Roman Catholic for my taste.

Saying this council defined orthodoxy, not the Bible. Or defines what makes a person a Christian, what does not. I'll go back to the Bible and I'd have to say if someone really, from their heart, believes that Jesus is the Lord and that God raised them from the dead and they confess those things, I'd have to say, well, I can't say God doesn't love them and that they're not saved.

If God doesn't, that's between them and Him. I can't be their judge. But it seems to me, like on the basis of Scripture, I cannot exclude them, even if it turns out in discussions they believe that Jesus had different colored eyebrows than I believe He had, or even something more major than that.

Especially things that can't really be fully understood anyway. So that business about colored eyebrows, I probably shouldn't say because that seems to trivialize the issue of the deity of Christ. I don't mean to trivialize it by any means at all.

To me it's a very important and cherished truth. But I'm just not sure that a full understanding of that particular decision of the Nicene Council is the basis for God's acceptance or rejection of a person in eternity. If it is, He hasn't let us in on it in the Bible.

Okay, now in subsequent years other emperors arose. For instance, Constantine's son Constantius happened to be an Arian. So the Nicene decision held true until the death of Constantine.

Then his son, the emperor, made Arianism the orthodoxy against the Nicene Council and banished Athanasius. In fact, Athanasius during his lifetime was banished five different times by emperors who happened to favor Arius, even after the Nicene Council. So we can see that whatever the churchmen decided, the emperor is the one who is really making the decisions of who's okay and who's not okay in those days.

Eventually the orthodox position came to dominate the empire, though the invasion of the West by barbarians and others, and their setting up of separate states during the following century led to widespread conversion to the Arian point of view. And Arianism thus reigned in the West until the conversion of the Franks and the rise of their orthodox

empire. So there was a period of time when an enormous percentage of Christians in what was considered the church were Arian in their beliefs and where virtually no one in their region, as far as we know, held a contrary view, just depending on which emperor was endorsing what.

Now I'm not saying that truth is determined. The truth of the matter is not determined by what the emperor thinks. But the question of whether the church accepted someone who held a certain belief or rejected them and anathematized them was determined often by the character and the disposition of the emperors in too many cases.

Now we're going to run out of time here before we run out of notes. Let me go quickly through some of this other material. There was another council that discussed the humanity of Christ.

Once it was determined that Jesus was God, there were some who rose up to almost deny that he was man also and believed that he didn't have a truly human nature. And so in 381, there was a second ecumenical council, the first being at Nicaea. This one is at Constantinople.

And it had to be called to address the defective view of Christ's humanity taught by a man named Apollarius, who was the bishop of Laodicea. And Apollarius taught that Christ was fully divine but not fully human. And so this council in 381 at Constantinople, which is the first of three eventually, there were three councils at Constantinople before it was all over, the first of them established the point as orthodoxy that Jesus was not only divine but he was also fully human.

Then another controversy over Christ arose after that. A man named Nestorius, a very important figure, a very energetic, evangelistic man. His followers still exist today.

The Nestorian church was one of the most evangelistic missionary movements in its day, in its heyday. But Nestorius was condemned as a heretic. Why? Well, he was the bishop of Constantinople, the very place where the last council had been held.

But he had just not quite the politically correct view of the way in which the human nature and the divine nature of Christ were merged. Now, this has to be understood in terms of the political problems between the church of Constantinople and the church in Alexandria. Nestorius was the bishop of Constantinople, but the bishop of Alexandria was a guy named Cyril.

And he was one of the great promoters of the idea that Mary was the mother of God and should be venerated as such. It was Cyril who advocated the title for Mary, Theotokos, which means literally, the God-bearer or the mother of God. The term mother of God came to be used of Mary about this time through the influence of Cyril of Alexandria.

And Cyril argued that if Jesus was God, that meant that Mary was the mother of God. But

Nestorius said, No, no, no, that's not so. Mary was the mother of Christ's human nature, but she was not the mother of his divine nature.

Now, in order to establish that, Nestorius tried to determine exactly in what way the human nature and the divine nature of Christ were interfaced with each other. And he didn't quite connect them enough for the satisfaction of Cyril. And Cyril had Nestorius condemned.

But basically, Nestorius taught that the human and the divine natures of Christ existed in a conjunction, but not a total unity with one another or union. Now, what is the difference? That's what they had to decide. I'm not sure why they had to decide it, but they did.

There were some issues besides the Mary being the God-bearer part. There was also the argument that when Jesus suffered, his divine nature did not suffer, but only his human nature suffered. Now, again, to my mind, this is splitting hairs.

But it was something that offended some of the Orthodox guys in those days. And they said, Wait a minute. If Jesus only suffered in his human nature, then he couldn't very well have suffered for all humanity, because a man might give his life for another man.

But for Jesus to give his life for all men, there had to be the quality of infinity in his suffering, so that it might be adequate for all people, no matter how many they might be. And therefore, it had to be his divine nature also who suffered, because only by saying so would you bring the quality of infinity into his sufferings to make it possible for him to suffer for all humanity. And this was Cyril's argument.

In my mind, this is all heady stuff that never had to be discussed, as far as I'm concerned. I can't imagine Jesus sitting down with his disciples and discussing issues like this. Or the apostles, for that matter.

I just don't think it was ever the kind of stuff that concerned them. But what you'll find is, as they got into this idea of defining with creeds, they got more and more and more and more and more petty in terms of what they were going to argue for. I mean, deciding if Jesus is God or not, that's a big issue.

That's not a small issue. Deciding if he's really got full human nature, too. Well, that's, I guess, a big issue, too.

Not as big as whether he's God or not. That's a bigger issue. That's a small issue.

But how exactly were the divine and the human natures merged in Christ? Were they one, or were they two, or were they in conjunction with each other, or were they in union with each other? Does anyone really have to care? Did the disciples ever question things like that? Or care? Did Jesus care for them? No, I don't know. It just sounds like the kind

of stuff that had no place in the teaching of Jesus or the apostles. It's speculations of man.

I don't know for sure what the answer is. And I'm not sure that either argument is valid. I'm not sure that it had to be the divine nature that suffered so that it would have the quality of infinity.

I mean, I don't understand how Jesus' death atoned for us all. It's a mystery. You can import the quantity of infinity or omit it, and it's still a mystery.

You know, I mean, I can live without a full understanding of that. I accept that Jesus died for us all, that he atoned for us all. I don't have to go deeper into things that the Bible is quiet about.

David said in Psalm 131, he said, I'm not arrogant. He said, That's a good attitude David had that the councils needed to have more of, it seems to me. I'm not opposed to their conclusions.

I'm just opposed to the fact that it felt like they had to draw them in some cases. It says, yeah, I need to quote it better. Psalm 131, verse 1, King James is too high for me.

There are definitely things too profound for me. I'm a simple man. The disciples were simpler still.

They probably didn't have as much theology worked out in their head and theological opinions as I've got. And they probably didn't need them. I probably don't need them either.

I've got them. I don't know that it hurts me any, but it'll begin to hurt me if I begin to define who's a brother and who's not a brother by whether they share these particular opinions of mine. Or whether I call my views orthodoxy because that means correct opinion.

And orthodoxy happens to be whatever I hold to. Sounds very self-interested. Now, I'm not saying there weren't some extrapolations of these errors that could have theological ramifications bigger than the issue themselves.

But I just see the church getting into pettiness here. Into things too profound for man to fully understand, and yet acting as if they're not too profound for us. We can explain them, and once we do, we'll exclude everyone who doesn't agree with our explanation of them.

And many Christians today believe Nestorius got a raw deal. Many people think, and this is many, many of the church histories I've read, although Nestorius was condemned by Cyril and banished and spent the rest of his life in Egypt as in poverty. Many modern

Christians and church historians believe that Nestorius was probably not so wrong.

And that he was simply the victim of a political move that grew out of the political rivalry between the Sea of Alexandria and the Sea of Constantinople. Well, anyway, the matter was settled in favor of Cyril at the third ecumenical council, which was at Ephesus in the year 431. The council met and condemned the views of Nestorius even before Nestorian party arrived at the council.

Upon their arrival, the Nestorians found out they'd been condemned and set up their own rival council and their own rival church. And they went off and they started, their church eventually had its center in Persia. And the Persian government encouraged it because the Persians were rivals of Rome.

And they figured any group of Christians that were divided from Rome were on their side. And so the Nestorian church received favor in Persia. And unfortunately, the Nestorian church got into idols, images, I should say, and into some of the same political games that the Roman church did, but they did so separately.

The thing is, though, the Nestorian church was extremely evangelistic, very missionary minded, went out and carried the gospel, unfortunately bringing images and some things like that too, but not Mariology. They didn't take Mariology, Mariolatry there, because that was an issue that Nestorius didn't believe in. But they still exist today.

They're called the Assyrian Christians today. And I don't know where they can largely be found, but Nestorius influence continues to some extent. The emperor decided against the Nestorians, and Nestorius entered a monastery.

A Nestorian church having its center in Persia survived centuries of pagan influence, Muslim conquest, and hostility, and exists today under the name Assyrian Christianity. Another guy came on sort of on the side of Cyril in the same debate, but went too far, further than Cyril and the others felt good about. And this was a guy named Eutychus.

He was the abbot of a monastery near Constantinople. And he was really emphatic about the union of the two natures of Christ. He was very anti-Nestorian.

But he went so far as to say Christ only had one nature, or he's the one who said that Christ had before his incarnation two natures, a divine and a human. I don't know where he got that. Before his incarnation he had a human nature? I don't know where that comes from.

But he believed that Christ had a human nature and a divine nature before his incarnation. But after the incarnation, the human nature was absorbed in the divine to the point, he compared it like a drop of wine in the ocean being absorbed. So that essentially Christ had only one nature.

He argued that if Christ had really had a true human nature, that he would necessarily have had to succumb to temptation and so forth. And so with the arrival of Eutychus and his following, the controversy over how many natures Christ had was increased. In 451, there was a fourth general council called at Chalcedon to try to settle the matter.

It decided that Christ was both truly God and truly man, that the two natures were mingled in one person without confusion. This is quoting the council's decision, the Chalcedon confession, without confusion, change, division or separation. That is, the divine nature and the human nature of Christ are joined in Christ without confusion, change, division or separation.

Now I'm not going to argue that that statement is false except the confusion part. I can't say it's without confusion because I'm still confused even after they've made the decision. I'm really not going to argue any disagreement with their decision.

I just don't understand it. And if I don't understand it, I can accept by faith if it's true, but what I have a trouble with is knowing why I need to understand it or why I need to even know this. Where in the Bible is an issue like this taken up or addressed? Or does God in any inspired writing show an interest in this kind of discussion? It just seems like it's splitting little hairs, hairs which we don't even have adequate theological or biblical data to know where to put the cut.

Well, that decision of the Council of Chalcedon did not please all the church leaders and so there were some other groups that arose in Palestine and Egypt and Syria in the church which held that the teachings of Cyril and Eutychus were not done justice to at that council. So there was a fifth ecumenical council this time at Constantinople, the second one that would be there in the year 553. They ratified the Chalcedonian Creed but made changes leaning in the direction of Eutychus' view.

When the Roman Catholics say, well, the decisions of the councils, of the College of Bishops, these are authoritative. Say, well, which decision of which council? I mean, these councils canceled out. Previous council decisions in some cases are modified.

Oh, you weren't happy with that one? Well, modify it a little bit this direction. Are you happy now? Okay, good. Is that the way inspired theology is done? That's not my idea of divine inspiration.

The councils are human. The councils and the people who participate in them were products of their own environment, products of their thinking of their own day, products of the controversies. Many times they polarized over issues that there's no need to polarize over simply because someone made it controversial.

And by the very polarization, they began to find minute areas of difference that were elevated to great importance that I don't really see why they should be. You might see

how they should be, in which case you may be more enlightened than I am, but I can't see why some of those things should be that important. There was another controversy.

Oh, this is a great one. Over whether Christ had one will or two wills. Since he had two natures merged without confusion in one, how many wills did he have? And some argued that if Christ had a human will, he would necessarily have succumbed to temptation.

So he must have had only one will, the divine will. So they had to have another council that met at Constantinople. This is the third one at that location and the sixth one altogether in 681, the last for a while of the great ecumenical councils.

And this council in 681 at Constantinople was to deal with this question, did Jesus have one will or two wills? The council ratified the Chalcedonian Creed, adding that Christ had two wills, the human and the divine, but that his human will was subject to the divine will. Now, if I sound exasperated by this, it's not as if I have any objection to this decision. I agree with it.

I agree Jesus had two wills. He had, so do I, by the way. And they wore with each other.

The flesh has a will of its own and the spirit has a will of its own. And these two are contrary to one another, Paul said. And they wore against each other.

And Christ had two wills. But he said, not my will, but thine be done. His will was, it could discut pass from me.

But he said, not my will, but your will be done. God's will was that the cup not pass from him. Christ's will was the cup would.

But he surrendered his will to God's will, just like we're supposed to do. No problem with the decision. I just don't know why it had to be a controversy and why it had to be defined.

But you can see that the church, now that the persecution was over, had time on its hands. Time to discuss stuff that it never would have bothered to discuss or concern itself with during the 200 years of just being ablaze for God. Now, we've mainly talked about Christological errors.

There were also errors about the Holy Spirit. Arius and another guy named Macedonius taught that the Holy Spirit was not God. And so that was also taken up at a couple of the councils we've already mentioned.

The Council of Constantinople took it up, but also another council of Chalcedon in 451. Both of those, actually. The first council of Constantinople and the Council of Chalcedon both decided to take up that issue also and strengthen the doctrine of the deity of the Holy Spirit.

Now, there was another heresy to be dealt with, and that was Pelagianism. I was hoping to get to it in this session, but I'm afraid we're going to run out of time. I wish I wasn't.

Let me just tell you what it is. Maybe I will just give it brief coverage. Pelagius was a British monk, or maybe an Irish one.

No one knows for sure. But he found his way to North Africa where Augustine was. And he came into conflict with Augustine and there became a considerable controversy over this difference between Pelagius and Augustine.

Pelagius taught that Adam's sin affected only Adam and that each man is born innocent as Adam was before the fall, and no man is born with a sinful nature. Pelagius taught that all men's sin is a result of the bad examples of Adam and of society in general, that man can choose to do right and even to live a sinless life without special aid from God. Grace, according to Pelagius, is an enlightenment of man's reason by which God seeks to assist man to make right choices.

He also taught that physical death is not a judgment upon sin, but the natural part of the biological life cycle, that just because we're an organism we die, like all organisms die, it's not a matter of the wages of sin's death. Probably that last point was argued in order to counter the Augustinian view that babies die because they're born sinners, and death is a penalty for sin. Now, I don't have time to go into all the reasons Pelagius said this, that's just an introduction to him.

He was opposed by Augustine. Next time we'll have to take this up again and talk about the conflict because Augustine in response to Pelagius invented Calvinism as all Calvinists know. Well, they think Paul invented it, but they will admit that Augustine's views were the Calvinist views.

And Calvinism came into existence for the first time with St. Augustine in the context of his controversy over Pelagianism. And this was never really settled until 431 at the Council of Ephesus and Augustine was declared to be right and Pelagius wrong and he was treated forever as a heretic after that. I believe Pelagius was wrong in some ways, and I believe Augustine was wrong in some ways.

But I think both of them are probably in heaven. If one of them is not, I'm not sure which one I'd vote for. But we'll talk more about this conflict and the issues next time and we'll move along from there.