

LESSON 8:

Rediscovering Redeeming Love

Defining Jesus

Getting Started

The watchword for Judaism for over a thousand years had been the words from Deuteronomy 6:4:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

This is what is known as *monotheism*. The New Testament describes Christ as God and the Holy Spirit as God. It was believed that God was three equal *Persons* in One. During the second and third centuries, most Christians affirmed this most basic doctrine. But toward the middle of the third century, there was increasing discussion of how the incarnate Christ (Christ in a human body) could be God without affecting the divine oneness. It is difficult for us to imagine today, but over the course of two centuries, this basic doctrine of the Trinity was hammered out among theologians. It took three church councils over a period of 200 years to reconcile it. The main question before the church was: “Is Jesus Christ completely God or was He less than God?” A second question came in response to the first question: “Can Jesus save us if He was not God, as he had claimed?” So you might say that the salvation of man was on the line.

To understand how the heresies developed one must go back to the emperor Constantine and his decision to combine church and state. In an effort to save his beloved Roman Empire, he made the decision to make Christianity the state religion, believing this would bring Rome together. He would use schools versed in Christianity to educate the people and spread the Christian thought throughout the empire. This was not going to be easy, however, because Christianity itself had already divided into three main schools of thought; and they already displayed were antagonistic to one another.

- **Alexandria**—The first of these schools was organized under the philosopher, Pantaneus, to instruct Christian converts. These teachers used philosophy to interpret Christianity.
- **Antioch**—This school was founded by Lucian around 280. It represented the tradition of the Apostle John. These teachers accepted Scripture as its own best interpreter. Because of the prevalence of the philosophical group, the Gnostics, these teachers mistrusted philosophy.
- **Western**—The Western school of thought claimed writers from both Europe and North Africa. They were Latin-speaking, while both Alexandria and Antioch (the two Eastern schools) were Greek-speaking. Like the Antioch school, the Western school mistrusted philosophy and placed its principal emphasis on the practical application of Christianity. However, while the Western school used the same facts and Scriptures as Antioch,

By 325 when the first catholic council met...the church had developed several characteristics not distinctly taught in Scripture. It was by now:

(1) a visible universal church composed of bishops, (2) it taught that the sacraments carried with them a magical kind of transforming grace, (3) it employed a special priesthood (the clergy) who alone were qualified by ordination to act in the administration of those sacraments, and (4) it recognized the bishops as the ruling officers...All of these characteristics may still be seen in the various Christian groups that call themselves Catholic.

—Robert Baker
& John Landers,
**A Summary of
Christian History**

they followed the Alexandria school by using the philosophical approach to reach conclusions.

It is difficult to imagine that it could become this complicated so early on.

There is no way to expound on all the heresies which came to the forefront over the 200-year- span time period the church worked on this controversy. We will therefore cover only the three heresies that were discussed at length at three pivotal church councils. The Roman Church and the reformers disagreed vehemently over the doctrine of justification, but the reformers later stood behind their conclusions concerning the doctrine of Christ. Sadly, however, the reformers themselves eventually split over the doctrine of Christ as it was defined in the taking of the Lord’s Supper—the followers of Luther and of Calvin taking opposing views. Review these church councils on Chart 1.

Christological Councils			
	Council of Antioch	Council of Nicea	Council Chalcedon
Year	267	325	451
Heretical Theologian	Saballlius	Arius	Eutyches, Nestorius
Heretical Theology	Modalistic monaarchianism	Dynamic monarchianism	Monophysite Christology
Council’s Decision	Jesus is homoiousios with the Father	Jesus is homoiousios with the Father	Jesus is truly man and God. His two natures are not mixed, confused, separated, or divided.

The thoughts for this week are:

Council of Antioch and the Council of Nicea

Council of Chalcedon

Calvin versus Luther

Council of Antioch and Council of Nicea

We have already seen that in the early centuries the relationship of the Son of God and God the Father was a hotly disputed doctrine. Because *monotheism* is so prevalent in the Old Testament, it was important for the church, while confessing its faith in the deity of Christ, not to compromise historic monotheism. *Monotheism* is the belief that there is only one God.

Two major heresies which threatened *monotheism* were based on the concept of *monarchianism*. *Monarchianism* is a radically monotheistic and antitrinitarian doctrine that denies distinctions within the Godhead. For the monarchian, God is *one* but not *three in one*.

A heretic by the name of Sabellius was instrumental in the spread of monarchianism. He argued that Christ was of one essence with God, but was a lower mode of being than God himself. This was known as *homo-ousios*. This thought did not believe Jesus to be divine.

Two early church councils denounced the false teaching of monarchianism.

Council of Antioch

The first church council was held in 267 in Antioch, which was located in what would be southeastern Turkey today. At this council, the church rejected Sabellius and his formula claiming that Jesus is *homo-ousios* with the Father. *Homo-ousios* means “of like substance.” The church declared that instead Jesus was *homo-i-ousios*, which means “the same substance.” (What a difference an “i” makes!

1. Read John 1:1-4. What do you believe these verses say about the *substance* of Jesus

Council of Nicea

The first catholic church council to be called by Constantine for the purpose of unifying Christian doctrine for his empire was held in 325 in the city of Nicea. Nicea was located near what is today Istanbul, Turkey. In the fourth century, the church faced a new heresy veiled in a different form of monarchianism called *dynamic monarchianism*. In this view, championed by the heretic Arius, it stated Jesus was not eternal God, but he *became* God via adoption sometime after God already was.

2. (a) Read what Jesus says about Himself in John 15:5. Does this convince you that Jesus, like God, is eternal? Why or why not?

- (b) Also read John 1:1-5. What does this tell you about the relationship between Jesus and God?

The term **monarch** in our language describes royalty. Originally, however, the word was more directly linked to its Greek origin. The word **monarch** is a hybrid composed of a prefix and a root. The prefix **mono** means ‘one.’ The root **arch** means ‘beginning’ or ‘chief, ruler.’ When combined, **mono-arch** or **monarch** means “one or single chief or ruler. The idea of monarchianism, therefore, refers to God as the one or single ruler.

–R.C. Sproul,
**What is Reformed
Theology?**

A physical illustration of the Trinity is the egg. If one of these parts is missing, it is not completely an egg, but when the three parts are together it can be called an egg.

Another popular illustration is water. All water shares the same chemistry, but it can be a liquid, ice, or steam. It is all the same, just in different forms.

3. The church fought for over 200 years to preserve these critical doctrines concerning Christ. Do you believe there are critical doctrines of the church are being threatened today? If so, which ones?

(b) Do you feel that it is the responsibility of the church today to uphold the sound doctrine of Christ? Why or why not?

(c) What are ways that your church can make certain that correct doctrine is upheld?

(d) What part do you see yourself playing in this process?

4. Why do you believe it is so important to believe that Father, Son, and Spirit are equally God over all, blessed forever, in whose name alone we trust, on whose arm we rely, and whose majesty alone we love and adore?

- God, the Father; Jesus, the Son; and the Holy Spirit are the same in *substance*.
- Jesus is *eternal* just like the Father and the Holy Spirit.
- It took over 200 years to establish these doctrines and it is our responsibility to uphold them in our generation.

Truth for Today: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.* John 1:1-2

Council of Chalcedon

Following the Council of Nicea, the Council of Constantinople met in 381 and wrote the *Nicene Creed*. (See margin.) But the fight for sound doctrine concerning Christ was far from over. By the fifth century, the church faced another threat. Are you beginning to see how heresy is an ever present battle to be fought by the church? In Matthew 7:15 Jesus said:

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

1. Who do you believe are false prophets today? What *sheep's clothing* do they wear?

In 451, a little over a century after the Council of Nicea, another council meeting was held in Chalcedon to fight heresy on two more fronts. The full deity and humanity of Christ were being assaulted by both Eutycheism and Nestorianism.

- Eutycheism argued that Christ is one person with one nature. He attacked the idea that Jesus is one person with two natures, a divine nature and a human nature. For Eutycheism, Jesus had neither a purely divine nature nor a purely human nature, but one that can be viewed as either a *humanized* divine nature or a *deified* human nature.
- Nestorianism, on the other hand, argued that only two persons can have two natures. Hence he maintained that Jesus is really two persons. What Eutycheism blended together, Nestorianism tore apart.

The Council of Chalcedon came to the resolution that four negatives must be maintained about Christ. His natures were *not* mixed, confused, separated, or divided. These four negatives have served as the basis for much theological debate ever since. R.C. Sproul says: "This statement affirms that each nature retains its own attributes, meaning that in the incarnation Christ's divine nature retained all of its divine attributes while his human nature retained the attributes of humanity." What this means is that Jesus was both fully God and fully man! In Christ, we find two natures in one Person.

Jesus is referred to in Scripture as both *the Son of God* and the *Son of Man*.

1. (a) What does Hebrews 2:17 say about Jesus' humanity?

- (b) What does Colossians 1:15-17 and John 10:30 say about the deity of Christ?

At the Council of Constantinople in 381, The **Nicene Creed** was first published. Today it is the most widely accepted of the Christian creeds, adopted by the Orthodox churches of the East, the Roman Church, the Anglican Church, and many Protestant churches. It describes Jesus as: "the only begotten Son of God, Begotten of his Father before all worlds. God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father. By whom all things were made: Who for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, Also was made man, And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, And ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father, And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: whose kingdom shall have no end."

2. (a) In our modern culture which do you believe is challenged more, the humanity of Christ or His deity? Name ways that you have seen the correct doctrine of Christ perverted. (See Nicene Creed of correct doctrine in the margin.)

(b) Name ways in your own life that you must be careful not to pervert the sound doctrine of Christ.

3. Why do you believe that it is important for Christians to understand the history of these major church councils?

4. When talking to other people, what are some *red flags* to you that his or her doctrine of Christ may be false?

- Attacks of heresy never end in the church.
- The Council of Chalcedon resolved that Jesus was both fully God and fully man.
- Four *negatives* concerning Christ's nature were established that have become theological mainstays: Jesus' nature is *not* mixed, confused, separated, or divided.

Truth for Today: *He who has seen me has seen the Father.* John 19:4

Calvin versus Luther

One of the great tragedies of the Reformation is the inability of Luther's and Calvin's followers to remain united on important areas of theology. The major disagreements between the Lutherans and the Reformed theologians stemmed from controversy over the Lord's Supper. Though that is where the dispute manifested itself, the root of it lay in the doctrine of Christ.

Both Luther and Calvin rejected the Roman Catholic view of the Lord's Supper but they did not agree with each other on the doctrine.

- Catholics believed in *transubstantiation*. It taught that during the mass a miracle takes place by which the substance of the ordinary elements of bread and wine changes into the *physical* substance of the body and blood of Christ. To the human senses, the bread and wine exhibit no perceivable change. They still look like, taste like, and smell like bread and wine; but, they become the actual flesh and blood of Christ at the time of communion.
- Luther believed in *consubstantiation*. He rejected the Catholic doctrine, but maintained that the body and blood of Christ are somehow present in, under, and through the elements of bread and wine in a physical sense.
- Zwingli and others took a *symbolic* view which was different from the Catholics and the Lutherans. They taught that the bread and wine were only *symbolic* of the body and blood of Christ.
- Calvin believed in the *spiritual* presence of Christ during the taking of the Lord's Supper. He rejected all three of the above views. He believed that though Christ's body and blood remain in heaven, they are spiritually made present to us at communion by Jesus' omnipresent divine nature. Wherever the divine nature of Christ is present, He is truly present. This is consistent with Jesus' own teaching that He was *going away* yet would *abide* with us (John 14:5-28). When we meet with Jesus at the Lord's Supper we commune with Him.

1. (a) Read Matthew 26:26-30. What do you believe to be the true doctrine of the Lord's Supper?

- (b) What difference do you believe it makes which doctrine you accept? Is your doctrine of Christ affected by what you believe about the Lord's Supper?

2. The Lord's Supper is celebrated at the same time in many parts of the world. How does this affect the belief of *transubstantiation*?

Imagine an eight-ounce glass. Can it contain an infinite volume of water? No. The glass can contain only eight ounces. To be sure, Christ is not a glass. His human nature has the fullness of God dwelling in him bodily but that fullness is by no means contained within that vessel of humanity or limited to it.

—R.C. Sproul,
**What is Reformed
Theology**

