

THE GREAT JESUS DEBATES

4

Early Church Battles about the Person and Work of Jesus



DOUGLAS W. JOHNSON

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A black and white photograph showing a person's hands holding a crown of thorns. The person's face is partially visible in shadow, looking down at the crown. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the texture of the thorns and the person's hands.

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*To my parents,
Walter and Olga Johnson,
and to my wife, Ann*



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Contents

Abbreviations	7
Preface	9
Introduction: The Background for the Debates	15
1. The Gnostic and Marcionite Controversies: Irenaeus	41
2. The Trinitarian Controversy: From Nicaea to Constantinople	75
3. The Christological Controversy	105
4. The Controversy over Grace: Augustine and Pelagius	121
5. Looking Backward	143
6. Jesus Then and Now	151
A Timeline of Selected Persons and Events in the History of the Christian Church	163
Brief Glossary of Terms	169
Notes	173
The Three Universal or Ecumenical Creeds	183

Preface

The origins of this book—the reasons for its existence—can be illustrated through a couple of anecdotes. First, some years ago, while I was teaching a college religion class, our admissions officer showed up with a young woman in tow who was interested in religion courses. Because I was ever eager to find new recruits for our department, I told the class to take five and turned my attention to her. I asked what types of subjects she was interested in and she said she wanted Bible courses. I assured her that we had a number of them. Then, always eager to sell my own wares, I told her that we offered church history courses as well. She gave me a strange look and asked, “Why in the world should I ever study anything like *that*?” I did my best to explain that we understand ourselves, our world, and our faith in ways that have been handed down to us. These beliefs become so much a part of us that they influence us in ways we do not know. Our views of everything are, to some extent, shaped by the traditions that have been handed down to us. I finished by suggesting that none of us reads the Scriptures “pure,” but we see them through the lenses of our backgrounds. She looked me straight in the eye and said, “I read them pure.” Then she walked out the door. I never saw her again.

Second, my wife and I recently attended Christmas programs at a variety of churches. One event, at a Baptist

megachurch, could only be called an extravaganza. The first part was strictly showbiz, including Santa, Rudolph, Elvis, and a large supporting cast. The second part was a rather well-done portrayal of the events of the nativity. Although this second part seemed to stand well enough on its own, a third part was evidently considered necessary. Here the pastor explained the meaning of Christmas: It all had to do with Jesus coming to die on the cross to pay for our sins. Once we accepted this, and thus were “born-again,” we could rest secure that our salvation was assured.

Our next visit was to a “singing Christmas tree” at a large Presbyterian church. It was a delightful program. Again, a follow-up sermonette was thought to be necessary to clarify the significance of Christmas. A sincere layman related how he was unsure of his destiny until he was told that Jesus’ death on the cross took away his guilt.

Third, we attended a children’s Christmas program at a Lutheran church. It had the usual manger, Wise Men, and traditional biblical characters represented. It was a pleasant experience. At its conclusion we were told that Jesus was born for one reason: so He could die and take away our sins.

Nobody should doubt that Jesus’ death on the cross has been of crucial importance to Christians throughout the history of Christianity. It remains so today. The account of His crucifixion certainly can be found in the Scriptures. But surely a sufficient account of the person and work of Jesus Christ will need to relate the cross to the fullness of His ministry, including His incarnation, teachings, healing, and, of course, His victory over sin and death confirmed in the resurrection. Perhaps such a presentation also will deal more fully with the life and struggles of the believer on his or her earthly pilgrimage.

A study of the beliefs of the early Christians, those standing closest to Jesus and His times, reveals there are a number of such views of what Jesus was all about, most of which take into account precisely this fullness of His ministry. The collective views of the

PREFACE

Early Church about Jesus, His person and work, form a rich tapestry with many threads. Some of the Early Church fathers tried to interweave all these threads. A few stressed one or two to the exclusion of the rest. Others clung to parts of the tapestry in ways that seemed to deny its essence or its wholeness. In the course of the debates about Jesus, some threads eventually were rejected either as denying God's grace or as holding it in ways that undercut the very grace they were attempting to proclaim.

What the Church eventually came to affirm about Jesus and His work was also closely related to what is given to, and expected of, the Christian in his or her daily life. Learning what the Early Church said about Jesus gives insight into how we can cope with our present-day struggles. A knowledge of the debates in the Early Church, and how the arguments eventually were resolved, can supply us with a fuller and a richer understanding of why the Church today holds to some of its core beliefs and how the struggles of the Early Church can assist us as we attempt to come to grips with parallel questions in our own day.

We moderns—especially us in the United States—tend to subject ourselves to a kind of collective amnesia in which we cut ourselves off from our past. We orient ourselves to the future and its promises. This attitude has aided us in producing a more prosperous world with tremendous technology and medical discoveries. But because we have neglected our own past, as if under the influence of a kind of cultural amnesia or dementia, we do not fully know who we are because we have lost the memory of those experiences that in fact have shaped us.

There is actually a “history” to our disregard of history, especially when it concerns the Christian community and its faith. Some Protestant groups during the Reformation and after were rightly offended by the corruption they found in the church of their day. This dissatisfaction led to the conclusion that almost everything in the centuries preceding them was itself corrupt and should be avoided at best and condemned at worst. Somewhat

later, we come to that period usually referred to as the Enlightenment. The Western world was excited by the discovery of the powers and uses of reason. A rational God, they were convinced, created a rational world, which could be understood by rational humans. Anything that did not conform to this view of the universe was to be rejected outright. Clearly, one of those things that must be cast out was religion, at least in many of its traditional forms. For many Enlightenment thinkers, the whole sweep of Christian history was irrational and therefore merely “superstition.” It needed to be thrown into the trash as an impediment to progress and right thinking.

With these attitudes influencing us, coupled with our desire to be forward looking, it is no wonder that many Christians are interested in the Bible and current events, with nothing in between. This bias against the study of history and the ethical, religious, and other constraints and consequences of such study is particularly insidious when it pervades the Christian community. Christianity has a long history in which the Church has tried to work out and proclaim its basic message while simultaneously attempting to come to grips with this or that culture, philosophy, and historical setting. The faith delivered to us today is in large part the result of these struggles. In fact, during the first five centuries of the Church’s existence most of the basic issues of doctrine were hammered out. Four great debates stand out as crucially important: (1) the Gnostic Controversy, in which Christianity affirmed that the Savior is the Creator; (2) the Arian Controversy, in which the doctrine of the Trinity was developed; (3) the Christological Controversy, in which the beliefs about the person of Jesus Christ were debated; and (4) the Pelagian Controversy, in which the arguments centered around issues of grace and free will. To be ignorant of these debates is to be ignorant of how we Christians came to be who we are. To know about them is to have a fuller understanding of our faith and what it means for our lives today.

PREFACE

Some people will never be interested in delving into such things, but those who are so inclined may well find this little book to be helpful and informative. It is intended for the many readers who are not, or not yet, professional church workers (those who are embarking on the path to become theologians or church historians); clergy and others who can use a review; and those who will never become church professionals but are interested in learning about the early centuries of the Christian Church. I hope all these individuals, and others, can gain something useful from reading this book.

In light of the intended readership of this book, I have attempted to keep matters as simple as possible. Many persons and events have gone unmentioned, though they may be important in their own right. Some scholars may object that I have included the wrong individuals and excluded the most relevant ones. It is a judgment call. I have also attempted to avoid excessive citations. When possible, references to *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* and *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* have been provided as a modern source for those who want to use this book for further study and research. These volumes are readily available at libraries and online. I have also referred to primary sources; other references are made either when an important issue is in question or when someone's comments seemed either significant or particularly interesting.

It has been said that history is written by the winners. This remark holds true for the present volume. The main characters treated will be primarily those whose ideas and beliefs emerged victorious in the theological battles. This is not a problem for this book because its main intention is to reveal how we ended up where we are. By definition it is the "winners" who have most shaped the present understanding of the Christian faith and who are thus precisely the ones on whom we should concentrate our attention. Yet almost all parties to these arguments, whatever side they took, were sincere and considered themselves to be dedicated

followers of their Lord. It is hard to find the “good guys” and the “bad guys” in these controversies. The losers, too, will have their positions treated as fairly and as honestly as possible. In all honesty I like these individuals—especially the winners, the ones eventually judged most true to the faith. I believe they have a good deal to say to us today, even centuries later. We cannot, indeed, simply swallow everything they say, but I, for one, am sympathetic to them, as will probably become clear as you read this book.

The debates within early Christianity are subtle yet hideously complex. It is hoped that by stripping them to their basic concerns we will be able to see in them important statements about God, the human condition, and questions of the Christian life and salvation with which we still struggle.

Thanks are due to all those persons who have helped me in this enterprise. First, to my teachers and professors over the years, whose patience with me has bordered on the saintly, perhaps even the angelic. I am particularly thankful for the guidance of Herb Richardson at Harvard and Albert Outler at Southern Methodist University. I am also grateful to Prof. David Whitford and to Dr. Andrew Forbat for their helpful suggestions and corrections. The usual caveat is in order: The mistakes are my own. On a more personal level, I owe my wife, Ann, and my children, Cherie and Gregory, my undying gratitude and affection for their patience, understanding, and support.