

Elohim

By R.C. Sproul

Speaker 1:

Okay, no problem. It's called Johnny Come Home. Here are some things that have been written about his novel. Tactfully, all the elements of real life pain, humor, human passion and quest.

This classic tale is the dramatic study in contrast. It's the story of Scooter and Johnny, two men who once were inseparable friends who were simultaneously faced with the ultimate summons.

Each chooses differently, and neither's life is ever the same again. R.C. Sproul, a well-known theologian and evangelical teacher, is sensitive and brilliant in this, his first novel. His clever development of the characters draws the reader completely into their lives. In the powerful ending, we are compelled to explore the possibilities of choice in our own lives. How might things have turned out if we had chosen differently?

You'll want to read this premier novel, pick up a copy at your local bookstore or write the publisher. Give a copy to a friend or relative. Very soon, Christians everywhere, will be talking about how R.C. Sproul's Johnny has changed their lives. Dr. R.C. Sproul's first novel. Dr. Sproul is married, lives in Pennsylvania, has a daughter in her 20s, and also has a son, 19. He has a degree in philosophy from Westminster College, went to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Born in Pittsburgh. He has a Dr. Randus dogmatic at the Free University of Amsterdam, also Lit [inaudible] from Geneva College.

He has several other books besides this new novel. Let me list some of these. And these are not all that he's written. He has a book called If There Is a God, Why Are There Atheists?

Discovering the Ultimate Marriage. Excuse me, the Intimate Marriage. Knowing Scripture. This

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is a book that I personally have read because I teach hermeneutics. Knowing Scripture. Enjoyed that book very much. Reason to Believe, Answering Objections that People Have to Christianity. Then he has a number of articles written in publications like universities, his magazine, Christianity Today, Moody Monthly.

This week he's speaking on the series of the Names of God, Yesti, Yahweh and today Elohim, tomorrow Adonai. And then on Thursday, one of my great favorites, El Shaddai. And then finally on Friday, God his father. It's interesting to know that Dr. Sproul loves golf, sketching, painting, piano, jogging and honey. It's my pleasure to present to you Dr. R. C. Sproul.

R.C. Sproul:

I used to love jogging, as you can readily see. Thank you for those kind words, particularly about the novel, because when a theologian writes fiction, it's a totally different experience from other kinds of literature. It's something that you expose your own soul. And I have to say, writing that book was the most excruciating project I've ever undertaken. And yet at the same time, the most exhilarating. And of those critics who have reviewed it, the comment that I like the best comes from a man who is himself a novelist, an Anglican scholar who also teaches creative writing at the University. And he said that the only character in the novel who is holy is God. He got the message, and I appreciate it. So I hope you will go out and buy that novel. You don't have to read it. Just buy it.

And if you buy it and you read it, for heaven's sakes, don't give it away to somebody else and don't sell it to them. Take them by the hand at a bookstore and tell them, buy it. Yesterday we

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looked at the name of God, Yahweh. And today I'd like to direct your attention to this name, Elohim, which is the particular name for God that has perhaps more than any other, provoked the most controversy in higher critical theories of the Old Testament. Because as soon as we see this name Elohim, we see the problem.

And the problem is found at the end of the word. Who knows what the problem is? What's the problem? It's the Hebrew plural ending. The normal or generic term for God among Semitic people was the name El. You remember, Ba-al, who really is Ba-el. And we find all kinds of ancient gods with the word -el built into their name. And we also find this in Hebrew. Do you remember when Jacob wrestled? No, not when Jacob wrestled with the angel, but when he had his vision of the latter with the angels ascending and descending on it. And he named that place in the wilderness where he had his dream, Bethel. Remember? Or Beth-el, because he said, surely this place is the house of God, the gateway to heaven. And he used the word house of God. They had -el to indicate that.

So we see that name L throughout Hebrew literature affixed to names of places and of people, Daniel, for example, Ezekiel, and so on. Now, however, we add the plural ending, and it becomes Elohim, which could be translated literally gods. And that poses a problem in light of the fact that Christianity, Judeo-Christianity, is so strong in its affirmation of monotheism. Now what I'd like to do this morning is look at possible ways of understanding the meaning and the usage of this title or name properly, Elohim, for God. Why is this name found in its plural usage in the Bible?

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And I'm going to present different theories and alternatives that have been proffered by scholars over the years and then try to draw some conclusions from it. First of all, let's look at the pivotal significance of a study of this name that happened in the 19th century. During the 19th century, we saw the advent of what was called liberal theology. Now when we use terms labels like liberal and conservative, we throw those terms about rather loosely, and we talk about liberal politicians and conservative politicians, liberal economists and conservative economists and so on.

But when we talk about liberalism in Christianity, we're not just talking about a mindset or an approach to theology. We're generally referring here to a specific school of thought that appeared in history with certain distinctive patterns and tenants of thought that belong to the school. Particularly when we speak of 19th century liberalism. And one of the foundational tenets of 19th century liberalism was that Christianity must be understood from a natural perspective rather than a supernatural perspective, and that the supernatural elements contained within the text represent a kind of primitive, prescientific world view that must be cut through to get at some kind of substance of meaning in religion that is still applicable to a contemporary world.

And if I can simplify the history of theoretical thought and indeed run the risk of vast oversimplification, there was a buzzword in the 19th century that had various academic disciplines very excited, and it was the word evolution. Usually when we think about Christianity and evolution, we're thinking about the Scopes Monkey trial or the Arkansas court case of more recent vintage, and we're thinking about that Titanic struggle over the origin of man and the debate over biological evolution versus Christian views of creation.

But when I'm talking now about a buzzword in 19th century theoretical thought, I am not thinking so much of that issue of biology. I'm thinking of something else. And just for a little quick review. The pattern of theoretical thought of philosophical investigation in Western history has had different foci, different points of emphasis throughout intellectual inquiry periods. For example, the ancient Greeks were very, very much concerned about metaphysics, about questions of ultimate reality, about questions of being and becoming and nonbeing that we looked at in brief yesterday.

And then other periods of theoretical thought, particularly in the modern era, have focused attention on not so much on metaphysics, but on what we call epistemology, which, of course, is the science of how we learn or how we know what we know. Does knowledge or truth come to us principally through the mind, or does it come through the senses, or is there a combination, or is it neither? Do we learn things intuitively? Those are the issues of epistemology. And for most of Western philosophical history, from before Socrates to the 18th century, Western philosophy was preoccupied, basically either with questions of metaphysics or with questions of epistemology.

But there is a watershed, an impasse in the development of Western thought that is reached during the Enlightenment and reaches its consummate point with the great work of Immanuel Kant, who what became what is known as a reverent agnostic about our ability to learn anything of an ultimate sort through theoretical thought. Now, after Kant, philosophy branched out into many different directions, and the accent in 19th century philosophical inquiry was in trying to develop a philosophy of history. That's the key.

Now you may wonder what this has to do with studying the Bible. And let me just say at this point, it has everything to do with understanding where we are in the contemporary struggle with the credibility, for example, of the biblical documents. The dominant motif of 19th century philosophy was this motif of understanding history. And some of the most important philosophers of that period would number among them, certainly Hegel and Marx, both of whom offered very complex theories of how history is to be understood. That is, they gave us philosophies of history.

Now, in the Hegelian school, which dominated at least half of the 19th century, the key word was evolution. In Hegelian idealism, the idea was that all of world history is a dynamic, active, moving, progressive, unfolding of absolute reason or ultimate reason. So that history, in a sense, is the evolutionary outworking of pure ideals. Now not getting into all that which gets very, very abstract. Let's understand this underlying theory that all of history is moving and it's changing, but it is changing in a particular direction. It is in an upward pattern, a progressive movement, an evolution, not a devolution. And this concept became so gripping to philosophers that it began to influence other disciplines, not to mention biology.

But it wasn't merely biology where these ideas came into focus. They also came into focus in political theory and in economic theory. We think of Spencer Herbert Spencer's idea of social Darwinianism. And it engendered an unprecedented spirit of optimism in Western culture, that everything's getting better and better, and that the problems that have imposed grief and suffering for the world are steadily, slowly but surely being solved with new advances in medicine, new

advances in farming, technological and industrial advances, so that you could have the spirit of optimism where people really believed that we would have a war to end all wars, and that man was, in fact, coming of age, growing up, and was able now to think seriously about bringing to pass a utopian civilization.

It's not by accident, but most of the utopian books and experiments in Western history took place in the 19th century. What does this have to do with the Bible? Well, these ideas of evolution, philosophical evolution and historical evolution were also applied to the field of biblical studies and of comparative religions. And the operative thesis was that evolution moves from the simple to the complex, from the primitive to the sophisticated. And that's true not only in biology and in politics and in economics, but it must also be true in the developmental forms of human religion. And so the operating assumption is that religion follows the same pattern.

And if we look at the ancient religions, we see for the most part they were polytheistic. And if we look at primitive societies today where we find them in pockets of isolation, withdrawn from civilization, we also find a simple polytheistic religious idea. And so the natural law of evolution would suggest that religion, like everything else, moves in this evolutionary pattern. And it would be astonishing from a natural perspective to find one religion that is totally different in its development from all the rest. And so the question became, is Judeo-Christianity in its origins really monotheistic?

Since monotheism is a late development in the historical progression of religion, would we not naturally expect that that would be as true for Judaism as it would be for Egyptian religion, for

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Chinese religion, or what any other kind of religion? The philosophers and critics came to the text of scripture to see whether or not there was the same kind of evolutionary pattern in the development of Old Testament religion. And the thesis of some German scholars, Graff and Wellhausen, was that indeed, we do find the same kind of development from the simple to the complex in the Bible as we find everywhere else, and that monotheism is a late achievement of biblical religion.

Scholars have argued as to when and where and how monotheism finally emerges in Israel. When I went to seminary, which was in the early 60s, the consensus at my theological seminary was that monotheism emerged in 8th century Israel, and what we were taught was that Moses was not a monotheist. However, our professors believed there really was a Moses. Abraham was certainly not a monotheist if, in fact, there was an Abraham. Because when I went to school in the seminary where I went, I would say the majority of teachers came to the conclusion that Abraham was strictly a mythical character.

So we see coming out of this, the famous documentary hypothesis of the Old Testament. You're familiar with that, are you? For the most part. How many you know the JEDP theory that the Pentateuch was not written substantially by Moses, but that the first five books of the Old Testament were written and edited and redacted over a lengthy period of time and represent different strands of contributing editors and writers who made their contribution from different perspectives and different theologies from different points in this evolutionary scale.

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The priests wrote their own history that would, in a sense, bias the historical case to favor the priesthood. The priestly could. Well, of course, this theory became worked over more and more and more, and it became more and more sophisticated, so I saw theories of breaking it down not into four sources JEDP, but J one J two J three J four E one, E two E three E four D one D two, three, four, P one two three four. So on. So you have 16 different authors. It was a little bit embarrassing a couple of years ago when the Hebrew scholars in Jerusalem put all of these literary changes into a computer, and the computer told them it was written substantially by one author and didn't know how to deal with that.

But the thing that's amazing to me as a student of philosophy was that long after the evolutionary philosophical assumptions were virtually abandoned by Old Testament scholars, the literary conclusions based on that philosophical foundation remained uncritically accepted. But I don't want to get into all that in here, although I already have. What I want to do is just give you a glimpse as to why this term Elohim was so crucial to the debate. The pattern that Graff and Wellhausen saw emerging in religions of antiquity went like this. That the starting point of religion is animism.

Then there is the movement to the next evolutionary plateau, which is polytheism. Then the next plateau, which is a transitional plateau, is henotheism. And finally, the mature emerging product is monotheism. Can you read that? Polytheism to henotheism to monotheism. Well, what's animism? Did you ever see Dustin Hoffman and Little Big Man? You can tell. I'm not going to tell. In that he placed this ancient Indian who's struggling with the imposition of the white man's

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culture. And one of the things that he struggles with is the total lack of respect for animals and for trees and for foliage and for the environment.

And one of the themes of the movie is that Western man thinks he's so smart because he treats the objects of nature as inanimate where this primitive savage, with no philosophical speculation views his environment not only with respect, but casts a religious aura about it because he assumes there's a sense in which all of nature is alive or animated. Now what Animism means, basically, is that objects in nature are either inhabited themselves by life principles in his philosophical senses, the petite perceptions of the philosopher Leibniz, or in more crass ways of having evil spirits living in trees or in totem poles or in cows.

And people begin to worship elements of nature because there's a sense in which all of nature is an incarnation of God. The bee tree, the owl, and so on. From a biblical perspective, that stuff is condemned as idolatry for transferring the glory of the uncorruptible God the Creator and substituting for the Creator worship of the creature by four footed beasts and creeping things and crawling things and all that, like Paul elaborates in Romans One. But anyway, the first step in the evolutionary pattern is considered crass forms of animism.

And then as man develops, he gets blackboards, which are so much easier to use for me for some reason than this thing. Yes. Look, at right there. Horton is all right. Now, you're not going to be able to read if you're in the back. You're not going to be able to read what I write on that blackboard. But that's okay. Get your binoculars. If you can't read it, fake it. But I need that not as a pedagogical device, but as a psychological crutch. My little granddaughter has what she

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calls her night night, her nappy, her little blanket that she takes with her everywhere. And if you want to create a crisis in her life, you take away her night night.

You want to create a crisis in my life. You give me one of these things and take away my blackboard. And you do want me to be comfortable, right? Right. Because you're nice. Okay. Let's look at it here on the floor. What a blackboard gives you that other thing doesn't is a chance to cover up your mistakes. See, you're speaking and you forget where you are, right? You think about this. If you ever have to teach a science school class or whatever. And you forget where you are, you go to the blackboard and you just draw a line on. And everybody with the action, right? Doesn't mean anything. But I've just gained 15 seconds to remember where I was. That's why I have to have a blackboard. Okay?

Animism, we've just explained. Polytheism. Erase that line. That's art. Polytheism simply. Many gods. The ancient Romans and the ancient Greeks had a god for everything. They had a god for war. And who was that in Rome? Mars. They had a god for beauty. Who was that in Greece? Who? Venus. Venus was Roman. Aphrodite. They fought the whole war. The Trojan War over Aphrodite. Right? So you have all these. Who was the Roman? Who was the Greek goddess of purity? Diane? No. Diana was, she was a kind of part of Minerva. Wasn't she? The goddess of purity in Greece was Hestia. What was her name in Rome, John? Hestia. That's my wife name after a pagan. Roman goddess of purity. Her mother had great hopes for her. Polytheism you got a special God it takes. It's like a Washington bureaucracy.

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You got a special Department of Defense of the Interior, farming and so on. Commerce. You got a God or goddess for all that stuff. Please turn the tape. Decide to.

[audio abruptly stops]

Polytheism you got a special God. It takes. It's like a Washington bureaucracy. You got a special Department of Defense of the Interior, farming and so on. Commerce. You got a God or goddess for all that stuff.

Now, the transitional phase is henotheism. Is there anybody that doesn't know what henotheism is? See, we're going to learn something. Henotheism, break it down. You've heard of chicken of the sea? This is chicken of the God, right? No, that's not what it means. You get so sick of hearing this talk, John, if I put something new in it, right? It's for you. Henotheism is just a different word for one than mono. And what henotheism is a qualified form of monotheism. Monotheism means one God overall. Henotheism means that there's one God who rules over a nation. And there are limits to his sovereignty. And the normal limits are the geographical boundaries of the territory over which he is gone.

So that Baal becomes the God of the Canaanites. Daigon becomes the God of the Philistines. And it would be the idea that the Greeks have won boss God over their nation. The Romans have one boss God or high God over their nations. And the Jews have one God over their nation. And of course, the Jewish God would be Jehovah or Yahweh. But his territorial domain extends only from Dan to Beersheba. And in henotheism, the battle between nations becomes, in the last

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analysis, the Titanic struggle of the gods. The issue becomes is Israel's God, stronger than the Philistine God?

And the critics say this is what we find in the Old Testament. Yes, Yahweh is seen as the God of Israel during the patriarchal period, but he's engaged in battles with the other gods of the other nations. The conflict at Mount Carmel, Carmel between the priests and the prophets of Baal and the what's his name? Elijah. Elijah, right. And there are other confrontations. Well, the whole bit of the Philistines stealing the Ark of the Covenant and taking it and putting it into the temple of Daigon. And what happens when they come in in the morning? Daigon on his face, the fish God falls down and his statue crumbles at the feet of the throne of Yahweh, indicating what? The superior strength of the Jewish God over the Philistine God.

And you go back and you see Abraham talking to the angels by the oaks of Mamre. Right. Now the critics look at that and they say, well, what the Bible is really saying here, that God is not talking to Abraham beside the oaks of Mamre, but that Abraham is talking to the gods in the oaks of Mamre. So Abraham's an animist. And the proof of the pudding is found in the earliest strands of Old Testament literature, in the creation account itself, where it says that in the beginning we have gods involved in the creating of the world, and God says, Let us make man in our image. So we find polytheistic, animistic influences, according to the Valhausen theory, in the earliest stages of biblical religion.

And it's not until way later that the idea of the most High God emerges in the literature. The embarrassing problem is that whether you're looking at the J strand or the E Strand, you can't get

away from the fact that the opening chapters of the book talk about God as what? Creator of heaven and Earth. And that the God of Israel is seen from page one to the end of the Bible as not merely a local territorial deity, but as the sovereign one over heaven and Earth.

But again, I didn't come to get into the debate of monotheism, but merely to show you why this name has become pivotal in a very significant debate. Because if it's true that Old Testament religion followed a natural pattern of evolution, going through these stages from animism through polytheism to henotheism and ultimately to monotheism, what does that say about its origin and its authority? This would reduce the Scriptures to one more interesting, fascinating record from antiquity of how primitive people thought, religiously and theologically, about their history and their environment and about their world.

But it certainly cannot be taken seriously as revelation. So that once whole view of Scripture, and consequently once whole view of the content of Judeo-Christian theology stands or falls on how you understand this question. Just keep that in your pocket as you're dealing with. Now, there is a second way to deal with this name Elohim that's much more attractive to conservatives and to evangelicals, and I suspect is the majority report among evangelical Christians.

And that is that the very simple reason why the Bible says that in the beginning the Gods created the heaven and the Earth, and they say, Let us make man in our image. The reason why we have a plural form of God is because Judeo-Christianity from the very beginning is Trinitarian in character. And if we look at the whole Bible, we will see that in the act of creation, the creation itself is a Trinitarian activity, that not only is the Father involved in creation, but the New

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Testament tells us that in Him, by Him, through Him, and for Him were all things made. Nothing came from the being except by Him talking about whom? The Logos, the second person of the Trinity.

And then when the Scriptures speak of God, the Holy Spirit, not only is the Spirit of God actively portrayed in the graphic accounts of creation at the beginning where the Spirit broods upon the water, but also we are told that the Holy Spirit is the One by whom the cohesive forces of the whole universe are developed. The Spirit is the infrastructure, if you will, of the entire universe and of life itself. And so when we find that kind of a theology emerging in the Bible, the evangelical is happy to say, no problem here. Sure, we find the plural word for God because there is a plurality, at least a personae, in the Godhead that God is one yes, one in essence, but he is three in person.

And then what we have in Genesis is this cryptic clue or revelation of the Triune plural character of God himself, which is perfectly consistent with Orthodox Christianity. Now you can see how attractive that view of Elohim would be. And let me be very careful what I say now. I personally believe that the name Elohim is compatible with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. But I for one, have not been persuaded that the intent of the writers of these early Hebrew documents were trying to communicate, cryptically or otherwise, through this use of the plural form of the word God, an idea of the Trinity. I personally don't buy that. There's a whole lot of reasons for that that I don't have time to give you, except that it doesn't fit the pattern of progressive revelation about the character of God that we see in the Bible.

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Maybe that was the Holy Ghost intention, and I'm not saying for sure it wasn't, but I'm not persuaded. And it seems to be a little facile for us to duck the problem of the use of the term Elohim by simply saying, wow, we got the Trinity, and here it is. I think we're in trouble in historical literary categories when we try to do that. There is a third alternative, and it happens to be the one that I favor. We know that the Jews used the plural for more reasons than to express arithmetic. They didn't do this like other cultures did, but like in our own language, to give you semi parallels, certainly not exact parallels. We have what we call the editorial we, where a single person is speaking or writing, but he uses the plural to communicate.

Or we have what we call the imperial usage of the plural, where the King would speak in the plural rather than in the singular. Now, can you think of any regent in the world today who still does that, that you're familiar with? Anybody? Who still uses the imperial plural when he speaks and when he writes? My wife's saying, you. Come on, honey, who knows? Come on, this is for a pie. The Pope still speaks using that not because he's trying to communicate, that he's schizophrenic or anything like that. He is trying to speak because he is speaking for the chair, for the authority of Peter, the tradition of the Church and all of that is incorporated and stands behind.

And he is not speaking as an isolated individual in that theological understanding. But I think that what we have here in the use of the term Elohim is something close to the imperial plural, but not quite the same thing. It's been called by literary experts by two different names, the plural of majesty or the plural of intensity. Let me write that down. The plural of majesty or the plural

of intensity. These two designations mean pretty much the same thing. To understand what we're talking about here requires that we deal both with some theology and with some philosophy.

When the Church has reflected about the doctrine of God for 2000 years and tried to understand what kind of a being God is, we are frustrated from the very beginning. In my tradition of reformed theology, doctrine number one is what we call the incomprehensibility of God, which means that no finite human being can have a totally comprehensive understanding of God because God is so much higher. God is infinite, we're finite. And the only perspective I have to understand anything is my finite perspective.

And the only way I could have an infinite understanding of God would be for me to become what? Infinite, so that there are limits always to our understanding of God. Now that does not mean that we now have a license for skepticism and say that we can learn nothing about God, as some would do. To put it in simple terms, like the Bible does, the secret things belong to the Lord, our God, but that which he has revealed belongs to us and to our seat forever. So that there is something we do know about God that God has communicated to us in our terms that we can live by, depend on, and trust in.

But even in divine revelation and even in sacred Scripture, there is still that element that Luther called the Deus of Scondicus, the hiddenness of God. There's still that mirror that we look in darkly. Nobody has a totally comprehensive notion of God. And so when the Church has struggled with this overseas over the years, they've tried to say, well, what can we say about God?

And notice that much of what we say about God is said by what we call by way of negation. We say that God is infinite, immutable. Let's just take those two turns. What does it mean to be infinite? It's not finite. What does it mean to be mutable? Immutable, not mutable. We understand what it means to change. We deal with that all the time. And so what we do so much of the time when we talk about God is saying what God isn't to keep us from falling into serious and gross distortions of the character of God.

Now we also have the way of affirmation, where we do make positive statements about what God is in the history of theology. But so much of theology is setting the boundaries, where if you go over the boundaries this way, you'll end up in a heresy that's serious. And if you go over to boundary this way, you'll end up in a heresy that's serious. Now, one of the key doctrines of the character of God in Christian orthodoxy, and what I mean by Christian orthodoxy is a doctrine that for the most part is shared by all the various strands of classical Christians, Lutherans, Reform, Baptists, Anglican, Roman Catholic.

And one of those is that God is a simple being or that God has simplicity. Now, when we say that God is a simple being, we do not mean that he's simplistic or like, he's like, dull witted, like simple Simon. That's not what we mean here. What we mean when we say that God is a simple being is that God is not a composite being. We can get into some philosophy here. We'd better not.

When we try to describe God theologically, how do we do it? We say, God is infinite, invisible, immortal, and just. And we string all these words after the name of God. And what do we usually

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call these words that we use to describe God? Attributes. Now, how do we understand the attributes of God? Did you ever hear of the realist nominalist controversy? Anybody? How many have not? I better not get into that one. Are the attributes individual pieces of God? Where here's God. And a piece of God is justice, and another piece of God is love, and another piece of God is immutability, and another piece of God is omniscience. And another piece of God is a [inaudible]. And then we add up these pieces like we were building a house with a kitchen and a family room and three bedrooms.

And then once you put each piece together and arrange it in a certain way, you got yourself a house. Am I making sense? Some of you look real puzzled here. He said, Wait a minute, you just said. It was simple. It's not simple in that way.

[audio abruptly ends]