
God the Father



“In the beginning God . . .”

Genesis 1:1

God.

Such a small and simple word. Yet, such a vast and complex idea.

Most humans have some idea of God, even if that idea is that God does not exist. If one listens closely, it does not take long to discover that ideas of God are as diverse as the people who express them. How is it that Christians can claim with confidence not only to know *about* God but also to *know* God? These are the core questions that we want to explore in this study.

It is certainly important to think correctly about God because our ideas of God shape the conduct of our lives in the world. Right thinking about God is the work of theology and it is important. However, authentic Christian faith does not stop with questions about the nature of God but is especially interested in relationship with God. These are the interests that will guide our study as we ask, *Who is God?* and then, *How do we know God?*



WHO IS GOD?

God is not simply an idea; God is personal. As the first verse of the Bible suggests, God was not created but existed before all else. Yet, God does not exist for God's self. God's very nature burst forth into the creation of all that is as an expression of God's relational nature.

Christians confess that God exists in trinitarian community: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This does not mean that we believe in three gods, but that God is revealed to us as three persons in one substance or being. This holy community of love is the energy from which all of creation comes into existence and is sustained. Yes, there is a mystery to this that defies complete description, but the Bible (while not using the term "trinity") is consistent in its witness that God is revealed to us as one in three. Jesus himself taught us that we are to baptize disciples "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).

We learn many things from this confession of God as One in Three (Trinity). If the nature of God is to be understood in terms of the holy love that is offered and received within this relational intimacy, then the gospel takes on joyous and hopeful life. Why? Because we hear good news that we are invited into this circle of holy love that restores, heals, transforms, and renews. This holy relationship of the three in one is the ground from which everything else we confess about God must rise. The Bible shows us clearly that God is sovereign, powerful, mighty, and righteous. Taken in isolation, these ideas have too often led to a vision of God as angry and retributive. This is why it is so important to keep all conceptions and descriptions of God rooted in the life-giving relationship of holy love that is the God revealed to us in Jesus. This leads us to our second question.

HOW DO WE KNOW GOD?

We know God because God reveals himself to us. The writer of Hebrews in the New Testament says, “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe” (Heb. 1:1). The opening of John’s Gospel tells us, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18). Jesus Christ reveals God to us. The Bible and the life of the church, inspired and empowered by the Spirit, tell us this glad story.

The Bible also suggests that we can know God to some degree through God’s creation. The Apostle Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20). Most people observing the beauty, complexity, and expansiveness of creation acknowledge the plausibility that what we know and experience in the world is by design and not by chance. The exploration of the human body alone inspires us to join the psalmist in the observation that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). And, our awareness of rationality, logic, and love all testify to a purposefully ordered existence. Across the world and through the

centuries, people have acknowledged consistently some idea of God as creator and sustainer of all that is. This in itself is not proof of God’s existence, but it bears compelling witness to the image of God that is imprinted into the awareness of humanity.

We also see God revealed in the story of God’s relationship with a particular covenant people. The story of Abraham’s descendants (Israel) that forms the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) is a story that reveals God, not as aloof and disinterested, but as a God who intimately involves himself in and guides the corporate life of the people of God. In this way, the biblical image of God as a “father” makes sense. It especially makes sense in the patriarchal cultures of the ancient near east, where fathers were meant to protect, provide, and guide. Fathers were responsible for providing security for the family. Fathers were the voices of authority; they laid down the rules by which families conducted themselves. So, it is understandable that biblical authors would draw on the human image of “father” to try to explain the relationship of God to God’s people. Failures in human fatherhood notwithstanding, Jesus regularly spoke of God as his father—a familiarity that often angered the Jews. What Jesus seemed especially interested to communicate was that God can be known. The heart of God, if you will, is what motivated God’s initiating movement toward us in love. We see it first in the narrative of God’s covenant people and then clearly in Jesus, who is revealed to us in his baptism as “my Son, whom I love” (Matt. 3:17).

“I BELIEVE IN GOD”

Another important resource that forms what we know and believe about God is the testimony of God’s people, especially the witness of the church through twenty centuries of Christian history. John Wesley, our theological forebearer, understood that while Scripture is foundational to our faith, we interpret Scripture through the additional God-given resources of reason, experience, and tradition. “Tradition” refers to the church’s interpretation of Scripture, particularly the writings of ancient Christian leaders. Wesley thought we should pay close attention to the earliest Christian theologians since they were “nearest the fount,” as he put it. These would be people like Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and others. The young church worked diligently to articulate the story in ways that are faithful to the revelation of God in Christ Jesus and to Scripture. In this way, the creeds of the church teach us how to confess our faith in ways that are also faithful to God and to God’s revelation.

We acknowledge and believe that each of us can enjoy a personal relationship with God through Jesus by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Each of us can read the

Bible and be instructed by the Spirit, who illuminates our minds and inspires our hearts. However, our personal discipleship can never exclude the necessary place of the community of believers to guide us and teach us the way of Jesus. This is especially true for theology, or what we believe about God, the world, and salvation. None of us are authorized to construct independent or personal theologies, but we come together under the power of the Spirit, in mutual submission, to discern what God is saying to us as the people of God—the body of Christ given to proclaim good news to a broken world. This is why Christian discipleship, education, and nurture are so important.

Therefore, in harmony with followers of Jesus through the years and across the world, we confess these words from the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” Or, in the words of the Nicene Creed: “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, of things visible and invisible.”