

STUDY 3 God the Father

Four main points

1. Creation
2. Covenant
3. Adoption
4. Father of Jesus Christ

1. Creation

Reading:

Isa. 66:1, 2; John 1:3; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 11:3; Rev. 4:11
KTT 90–98 (101–111)
H & W 57-65

2. Covenant

Reading:

Gen. 9:8-17; 17:1-8; Ex. 24:1-18; 2 Sam. 7:11b-16;
Jer. 31:31-34; Matt. 26:26-29; 1 Cor. 5:7

3. Adoption

Reading:

Rom. 8:14–17 (or 1–17); Gal. 4:4-6; 1 Pet. 2:9–10; Gal. 3:1-7; Rom. 9:6-9

4. Father of Jesus Christ

Reading:

John 1:1-18; 8:56-58; 17:5, 24; 20:17
Luke 11:1-3; Rev. 22:13

1. Creation

One of the first ways of identifying God is to say that he is the one who created all things. It is right and proper that we think primarily of God the Father when we consider creation but that need not mean we exclude the role of the Son and the Spirit. God the Father is the ultimate author of creation. His Son is the agent through whom the world was created and for whom it exists (1 Cor. 8:6). The Spirit (wind, breath) is also associated with creation.

Creation came into being by God's supernatural power. The dignified record of the Genesis days stands in between the fantastic ancient mythological accounts and modern scientific cosmology. The Biblical creation story is different from both. It uses timeless language, which can communicate to every culture and era in a way that other forms could not. That is not to say that the Bible gives easy answers to modern scientific questions. By researching information not only from the Bible but from secular sources (including Persian, Greek and Roman), Archbishop Ussher (1581-1656) calculated the date of creation as being nightfall on 22 October 4004 BC but even young earth creationists seem unconvinced.

The central point is that God created (Rev. 4:11). He himself is uncreated. He created from nothing (*ex nihilo*; Heb. 11:3). Everything else is part of creation but God is distinct from it. The view that God and the universe are indivisible is called 'pantheism'. God created things that are unseen, including the spiritual realm of existence. Nothing other than God is to be worshipped, either instead of God or in addition to him

Since creation God has not left it to its own devices - like an absentee landlord. God is self-existent. He does not need the universe or humankind. The universe is not self-existent. The universe and the world could not exist without the maintaining presence of God. He preserves us. God is intimately involved in what he has created (Col. 1:17). Time and the creation began to exist together. The eternal nature of God is not traced to the beginning of time. God existed before time began. An existence without the passage of time is difficult for us to imagine. God also created the first man and woman (Adam and Eve) in a special, personal way - they were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). The exact relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom is difficult to define. God's ultimate power means that all things are working toward his final purpose. It is a source of wonder that God should be concerned with such a tiny world and even smaller creatures in his vast universe. Yet he has created all of us. He is the Father of his creation (Mal. 2: 10).

2. Covenant

God is Father to creation but only in a general sense. Though the universe is under his fatherly care that care is not as it could be because of the broken relationship between humankind and God caused by human sin. God desires to enter into a new relationship with a people of his own - to whom he can be Father in the fullest sense.

A key theme in Scripture is therefore that of covenant. Ancient Near Eastern treaties often took a covenant form. It was not so much a contract between equals for goods and services as a relationship between a great king and his vassals. The great king was often called the 'father' and the vassals his 'sons'. The technical term often used in the Old Testament means literally 'to cut a covenant'. Covenantal rites often included sacrifice and a covenant meal (see Exodus 24). The relationship was usually one of promises and obligations. Adam existed in a covenant relationship with God (Gen. 1:28-30). Another early covenant in the Bible was between God and Noah. Other important covenants were with Abraham (the patriarchal covenant), Moses (the Sinai covenant) and David (the Davidic covenant). In a sense these covenants did not replace one another but existed side by side. It is possible that the Israelites gathered at a New Year's Festival to renew the covenant (cf. our Covenant Service).

In the New Testament the theme of covenant is most closely connected with the Last Supper. In the institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus refers to his body as the bread and his blood as the wine. The reference to Jesus as the Passover (Paschal) Lamb is clear. The killing of Jesus as the Paschal Lamb would take place at Calvary (a name that does not appear in the New Testament but is a Latin translation of the word 'Golgotha' or place of the skull). Paul sees Christ's crucifixion as taking on himself the curses of the law in order to redeem mankind. (Gal. 3:13) The curse of the Sinaitic covenant is removed and the promise of the Davidic covenant is anticipated for, with the New Testament, a fresh expectation is given of the coming (Parousia) of the Messiah for the people who rightly call God 'Father', something that the church properly celebrates in Advent.

The condition or requirement of participating in this covenant is faith. Faith in the saving work of the Messiah was an important part of the covenant to which people in the Old Testament looked forward and which people from the New Testament onwards remember with thanksgiving, particularly in the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion or Eucharist (a word which means 'thanksgiving'). A believer shows a desire to continue in this covenant by obedience.

3. Adoption

There are two ways to count someone as Father - the first is to be born of that Father, the second is to be adopted by that Father and the Bible uses both ideas to express the Christian's relationship to God.

The Bible only rarely speaks of God as the Father of humankind and then only in a general way as creator and preserver. It is not a biblical view to speak of God as the Father of all in a special sense. The truth of the matter is that by nature we are not members of God's family and have no rights within it (Eph. 2:3). The initiative is with the Father. We cannot find our way into his family, any more than we can choose our parents before we are born. It all depends upon whether the Father is willing to adopt us and count us as his children.

Adoption is a consequence of conversion (coming to faith in Jesus Christ, as Lord and Saviour). Adoption of a 'sinner' (an ordinary fallen human being) is impossible for God, for membership of his family is marked by particular characteristics to which sin is alien and incompatible. Adoption is made possible because Christ has redeemed the Christian from sin and removed the blemishes that would otherwise make a person unfit to be called a child of God.

God stands in the relationship of Father only to those who trust in him. His fatherly care is for them. In the Bible, the father of faith is Abraham. Believers are in the family of Abraham because they share the faith of Abraham. Believers must show the family qualities by living lives of holiness and love.

Although the New Testament says that we are now God's children (1 John 3:2) there is a sense in which that process of adoption is still in the future and we are waiting for adoption at the resurrection (Rom. 8:23). God could have forgiven us without also giving us the privileges of being adopted into his family. We could have come into a right legal standing before him (justified) without God making us his children.

“When we put our trust in Christ, we now become by adoption what Christ is by nature” (Rom. 8:17). Paul puts this by saying that we receive the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:14), just as Jesus himself possessed the Spirit and was addressed by God as his Son (Lk. 3:22). The possession of the Spirit is proof of our sonship. It is because we possess the Spirit that we are able to confess Jesus as our Lord (1 Cor. 12:3) and to address God as our Father (Rom. 8:15)” (Marshall).

4. Father of Jesus Christ

When Jesus wanted to speak of God he spoke of him as 'Father'. We must not confuse the teaching of Jesus about the Fatherhood of God. There is the adoptive fatherhood of God in which believers are sons of God through faith (Gal. 3:26) and the unique relationship of Jesus with his Father. Jesus never muddled his relationship with God his Eternal Father with the privilege afforded to the disciples, adopted children, of having God as their Father.

God is the Father of Jesus Christ by eternal generation. The early church concluded that whatever 'only begotten' meant, it did not mean created. God did not become the Father of Jesus at his conception or at his birth, though clearly there is a sense in which God's Eternal Fatherhood is revealed in the temporal event, the conception of Jesus and his birth at Bethlehem. God the Father is Eternal Father to God the Eternal Son (or Eternal Word) 'before all ages'. A dispute arose in the early church because of one letter in a Greek word (*homoousios* or *homoiousios*). The first of these words (*homoousios*) means 'of the same nature' but the second word (*homoiousios*) means 'of a similar nature'. While the difference seems small (it is the Greek letter iota – hence 'not one iota of difference') it is nevertheless profound. To say the Eternal Son is only of a similar nature denies the doctrine of the Trinity (Arianism).

The Father-Son relationship that we see between the Eternal Father and the Eternal Son is different from the relationship that the disciples and Christians have with God. Jesus indicated these two relationships in the resurrection message through Mary by saying 'My Father and your Father' (John 20:17). The two are linked together, for one is the very ground of the other. The Sonship of Jesus, though on a unique level, forms the very basis of the Christian's sonship.

Two topical (controversial!) issues arise from this. Firstly, though Mary, the Mother of Jesus is 'blessed among women' her motherhood is different from God's fatherhood. She was Mother to Jesus in his earthly life (his state of humiliation) but cannot be the 'Mother of God' in an eternal sense (see John 19:26-27) and to refer to Mary as Mother of God is, at best, misleading. Secondly, though we want to use inclusive language, as often as is sensible, we must not weaken the Biblical teaching. The eternal relationship in the Godhead is revealed as Father-Son. Yet in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek (all are blessed with the promises of God as 'seed' of Abraham), slave nor free (God has given freedom to all who are in Christ), male nor female (all are given the blessings associated with sonship) in him (Gal 3:28).