

Key
**United
Methodist**
Beliefs

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Abingdon Press
Nashville

2013

way of learning the basics of Wesleyan Christianity. Catechisms have long been a part of Christian faith, and we have read through many of them in the process of writing this book. The most significant for our purposes is found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, a work to which Wesley himself was deeply indebted. Up until about the second half of the twentieth century, Wesleyans produced catechisms on a regular basis. This stopped at about the same time that many Wesleyans began to render what we might call various forms of “revisionist” theology. The traditional way of writing catechisms has been in question-and-answer format, and we have kept that format here. The final section of each chapter, “In Your Own Words,” includes study questions to help readers work through the ideas therein and integrate these ideas into their lives.

Right belief by itself, of course, is not enough. As Wesley put it, a person may be “as orthodox as the devil . . . and may all the while be as great a stranger as he to the religion of the heart.”² Right belief does matter, though, because it helps us know God more fully, and it is by knowing and loving God, and by God’s knowing and loving us, that we become the people God wants us to be. We read in the Roman Catholic catechism, “The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the love that never ends. Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all the works of perfect Christian virtue spring from love and have no other objective than to arrive at love.”³ The goal is love, and God is love. We should do all we can, therefore, to know God.

1 Who Is God the Father?

A Wesleyan Faith

When John Wesley set out to reform the nation and to spread scriptural holiness across England, he was fortunate to have a strong set of theological tailwinds driving him forward. He lived in a world that was saturated with the basic beliefs of Christianity. He studied and taught at the University of Oxford, where every teacher was required to assent to the core beliefs of the Church of England. He was a priest in a church in which all church members confessed every Sunday the faith of the ancient Church. He was the subject of a political state where only Christians who assented to one very important Christian belief, the doctrine of the Trinity, could serve in government. Even the calendar used by everyone was built around the Christian year, so that the great festivals of the Church were a constant reminder of the faith hammered out in the ancient Church. Hence Wesley did not need to worry very much about passing on the faith of the ages. He could take for granted that people were familiar with it. It was already deeply embedded in the minds of the people he sought to reach with the gospel. This does not mean, however, that they took it to heart, or that it was somehow life changing for them. Wesley’s task was that of bringing folk into a living relationship with God the Father, through the

revelation and work of the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. This was his passion.

Those theological tailwinds are no longer blowing across our culture today. Hence one of the first tasks is to be crystal clear about the identity of the God who Christians gladly serve and worship. The God of Christian faith, whether for Wesleyans or otherwise, is the Holy Trinity. The notion of the Trinity is hard to grasp, but it is at the core of what it means to love and serve the God who has saved us through Jesus Christ, and who lives with us every day by the power and work of the Holy Spirit. One of the most helpful discussions of the Trinity comes from a remarkable layperson, C. S. Lewis. In his book *Mere Christianity*, Lewis writes about the God of Christian faith as “three-personal.” He invites us to think about the difference between a straight line drawn on a piece of paper, a square drawn on a piece of paper, and a cube. The straight line is one-dimensional and quite simple. The square, which consists of four straight lines, is two-dimensional. A cube, however, which consists of six squares, is three-dimensional. Of course, the cube does consist of straight lines, but combines them in such a way as to create a complex object. As Lewis puts it, “As you advance to more real and more complicated levels, you do not leave behind you the things you found on the simpler levels: you still have them, but combined in new ways—in ways you could not imagine if you knew only the simpler levels.”¹

What does this have to do with the Trinity? Lewis says that we human beings exist on a rather simple level. One person equals one being. Two people are two separate beings. With God, however, things work differently. Personalities are combined in new ways, ways that we who do not live on God’s level cannot truly understand. In God’s dimension, “you find a being who is three Persons while remaining one Being, just as a cube is six squares while remaining one cube.”² Lewis notes that we cannot fully understand a being like that, “just as,

if we were so made that we perceived only two dimensions in space we could never properly imagine a cube. But we can get a sort of faint notion of it.”³ So the God of Christian faith is a personal God, just as we humans are personal beings. God, however, is personal in a much more complex way than we are. God is “three-personal.”

Christians have long called the three persons of the Trinity “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” God the Father, specifically, is the First Person of the Trinity. Why is the Father first? Imagine a river that divides into two separate streams in the form of a Y. The two branches of the river originate from the same source, just as the Son and the Holy Spirit originate from the Father. The Father sent the Son—Jesus Christ—into the world for our salvation, and the Father sent the Holy Spirit into the world to lead us into that salvation. Now here is where the analogy with the river breaks down: for the river to be like the Trinity, all three parts—the source and the two branches—would have to be eternal. No part existed before any other. Rivers do not work like that, but God does.

There are many places in the Bible where God is called “Father.” This designation for God is more frequent in the New Testament, but it does occur in the Old Testament too. The people of Israel at times talked about God as the father of their people. In Psalm 103:13 God is likened to a compassionate father: “As a father has compassion for his children, / so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.” In Proverbs 3:12, God is likened to a loving but disciplining father: “For the LORD reproves the one he loves, / as a father the son in whom he delights.” Isaiah 64:8 speaks of God as a father in the sense of God’s having given life to Israel: “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; / we are the clay, and you are our potter; / we are all the work of your hand.” Malachi 2:10 speaks of God as the one father and creator of all Israel. Some passages, such as 2 Samuel 7:13 and Psalm 2:7, speak of God as the father of Israel’s king. They do

not mean that these kings were God's sons the way Jesus was God's Son. Rather, the idea is that upon the ascension of the king, he was adopted as God's son.

There are other Old Testament references as well, but the language of Father for God occurs much more frequently in the New Testament. Jesus uses this language quite often in the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). There are several reasons for this. One is that, as we have seen, all of Israel could call God "Father," as God was the father of this people. Another is that Jesus was the Messiah, a term used for Israel's kings, and, as we noted, Israel thought of its kings as sons of God. The main reason, however, is found on the lips of the angel Gabriel, as he speaks to Mary, Jesus' mother: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Jesus was God's Son in a unique way, quite differently from the ways in which Israel or her kings could be called God's sons.

Nevertheless, Jesus taught his disciples to pray saying, "Our Father" (Matt 6:9). God is the Father of Jesus, and God is the Father of all who wish to love and serve God, though in a different way. In the Old Testament, Israel looked at God as its father. Now we who are Gentiles can be adopted into God's household and become children of God as well. In Ephesians, we read that those who follow Christ are adopted into God's household (Eph 1:5), and within this household there is "one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (4:4-6). In Romans 8:15-17 we read perhaps the most moving statement of our adoption into God's household: "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit

bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (see also Gal 4:4-7). When we are baptized as followers of Christ, then, it is like being adopted into the home in which God is the Father.

As we have seen, though, calling God "Father" involves more than just the way in which we name God. It involves a certain set of ideas about the ways in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to one another. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us that the Father sent the Son into the world (8:16, 18, 43; 10:36). The Son knows and loves the Father, and the Father loves the Son (19:15, 17). Jesus said, "The Father and I are one" (10:30); "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (14:11); and "If you know me, you will know my Father also" (14:7). Do you see the close—actually inseparable—relationship between the Father and the Son? Moreover, the Son draws us to the Father. As Jesus says, "You will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (14:20). Christ is alive within us, and through Christ we are drawn into the life of God. In other parts of John's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that he has asked the Father to send the Holy Spirit, who will remain with Jesus' followers forever (14:15, see also 15:26). Jesus is explicit that the Father will send the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name to continue to teach about the will of the Father even after Jesus has departed (John 14:26). The Father is, in a sense, the wellspring of the Trinity, a wellspring who has poured forth the Son and the Holy Spirit eternally. It is important to note here that the notion of God as Father is not beholden to human fatherhood, but rather the notion of human fatherhood is shown to us in the relationship between the Father and the Son.

At the heart of what it means to talk of God as Father is God's creating, generative nature. God the Father is the source of both love and life. From the Father come the Son and the Holy Spirit. Likewise, through the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit come all of

creation, all of humankind, the people of Israel, the person of Jesus Christ, and the salvation that is ours in Christ. Nothing exists without God, and the fountain of all life is God the Father. Therefore, we might think of God the Father as most purely expressing God's self-giving nature. It is within the very nature of God to give both life and love.

A Lived Faith

The ways in which we think about God affect the ways in which we think about our lives as Christians. If we believe that God shows us what it means to be loving, just, merciful, and forgiving, these ways of thinking about God will shape how we should act. If we think of God as harsh and judgmental, we ourselves are likely to be harsh and judgmental. If we think of God as warlike, or peaceful, tolerant, forgiving, or in some other way, this will probably affect the ways in which we live. To think of God as God the Father is to believe that God loves all people and wishes to save us from sin and death. If "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16), then we ourselves should be loving, self-giving people as well. Or, as the First Letter of John puts it, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:7-8).

To give of ourselves is at the heart of the Christian life. How do we use our money? How do we use our time? Do we use them only for ourselves, or in ways that give life, love, and hope to other people? Women and men from all different walks of life can give of themselves. People have different gifts (1 Cor 12:4-11), and these gifts contribute in particular ways to building up God's kingdom. Some people are good listeners, some are great preachers, and some

are good with their hands. Some Christians are great writers, great teachers of children, and outstanding models of parenting. Some Christians know how to use money in ways that contribute to God's work in the world, while others may be gifted to glorify God through music and art. The point is not exactly what your gift is, but that your attitude toward life is one of self-giving. The nature of God the Father is one of self-giving, and in like kind, we should give of ourselves to God and our neighbors as well.

A Deeper Faith

The language of God as Father is deeply meaningful for many Christians. It is a way for them to know and love God more fully. It is a way to relate to God and to remind us of how deeply God loves and cares for us. At the same time, some people have raised objections about the use of masculine language for God, and there are good reasons for asking these kinds of questions. After all, God is not really a male, right? Jesus was a man, but the Holy Trinity is neither male nor female. The word "Spirit" in Hebrew, *ruach*, is normally feminine, and in Greek, *pneuma*, is neuter (neither masculine nor feminine). Additionally, some Christians have asked whether talking about God only in masculine terms leads to our understanding women as secondary in importance to men.

The Bible does at times use feminine language for God. In the Old Testament particularly, a number of passages use motherly images for God. Several of these occur in the book of Isaiah. In Isaiah 42:14 God is said to cry out like a woman in labor. In Isaiah 46:1-4, we read about people who have to carry around statues of false gods on beasts of burden, but, rather than being carried, God carries Israel like a mother carries her child in the womb. In Isaiah 49:15 we read of a God who is like a mother nursing a child and as a pregnant woman. Likewise, in Isaiah 66:13 we read, "As a mother

comforts her child, / so I [God] will comfort you.” Other books of the Bible employ this kind of imagery as well. Numbers 11:12 describes God as a mother and an infant’s nurse, and Deuteronomy 32:15 describes God as the mother who has given birth to Israel. References to God in feminine terms are less common in the New Testament, though Jesus compares himself to a mother hen who wishes to protect her young (Matt 23:37), and he talks about the beginning of God’s new reign on the earth as being like “birth pangs” (Mark 13:8; Matt 24:8).

Of course, motherly images certainly do not represent the experience of all women, just as fatherly images do not represent the experience of all men. The point here is that the Bible does at times reference God in feminine terms. If the Bible uses feminine language for God, is there any reason that we cannot or should not use this language too? Feminine language for God can be helpful and appropriate, *so long as we are clear that the God we are talking about is the God of Israel, the God who became flesh in Jesus Christ for our salvation, and who lives and abides with us in the Holy Spirit.*

The point of our God-talk, indeed of all Christian theology worth reading, is to bring us closer to God. To talk about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit connects us with the ways in which Christians have thought about God’s saving work through the centuries. God the Father sent the Son for our salvation, and God continues to work in our lives through the Holy Spirit. There is too much packed into this language, too much theology built up around it, too many theological works that use this language, simply to dispense with it. Again, it is deeply meaningful language for many people. Nevertheless, while it would be harmful to stop using this language, it may be helpful and appropriate at times to use other language for God, including feminine language.

The Catechism

The Nature of God

Q. Who is the God of all creation?

A. The God of all creation is the Holy Trinity.

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:1).

“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:3).

“For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:16-17)

Q. What does it mean to say that God is the Trinity? A. It means that God is “three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”⁴

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Deut 6:4).

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19).

Q. Who are the three persons of the Trinity?

A. Christians have long known them as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Q. Why is it important to know God as the Trinity?

A. Because God has acted through all three persons of the Trinity for our salvation.

Q. Are the three persons of the Holy Trinity equal to one another?

A. The three persons of the Holy Trinity are equal to one another because they are one and the same God.⁵

Q. How do the three persons of the Holy Trinity differ from one another?

A. The three persons of the Trinity differ from one another as follows:

- a. God the Father is neither begotten nor proceeding from any other person.
- b. God the Son from all eternity is begotten from the Father.
- c. God the Holy Spirit from all eternity proceeds from the Father.⁶

“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.” (John 15:26).

“And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal 4:6).

God the Father

Q. Who is God the Father?

A. The First Person of the Trinity, from whom the Son is eternally begotten, and from whom the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds.

In Your Own Words

1. Some people find the concept of God as Father valuable and enriching, while others struggle with it. Perhaps their relationship with their own father was difficult. How is God like and unlike your father?
2. Proverbs 3:12 says that God reproves, or disciplines, his children. When is a time in your life when you felt God disciplined you? In your opinion what are the most effective ways to discipline children? Do you practice spiritual disciplines (acts of mercy, fasting, reading the Scripture, partaking of the sacraments, attending worship, and so forth)?
3. What does the Lord’s Prayer teach us about God our Father? How is understanding God as *our* Father different from understanding God only as *my* Father?
4. God is neither male nor female, but how can using female imagery enrich your own understanding of God?
5. God is our Creator who continues to work on our lives today. Share a time when you felt close to God. Where were you? Who were you with? Did it change you in any way?

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Notes

Introduction

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.
2. "The Way to the Kingdom" in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, eds. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 125.
3. *Roman Catechism*, Prologue, 10.

1. Who Is God the Father?

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, revised and amplified version (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 162.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. This statement comes from Article I of the "Articles of Religion" in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), ¶103. We have changed "Holy Ghost" to "Holy Spirit."
5. This Q and A is taken from the *Eastern Orthodox Catechism* (Boston: The Albanian Orthodox Church in America, 1954), 16.
6. Ibid.