

One God, the Father

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True Christian unity can only be properly built upon the simplest and most profound of all biblical truths: "one God, the Father." All other Christian truths are ultimately derived from this truth. In essence, Christian unity is formed by becoming a part of God family through believing in God's Son, Jesus Christ, and then receiving the gift of God's own Spirit. It is for this reason that true Christian unity is called in Ephesians "the unity of the Spirit." This is a unity that is created by God himself - through his Son and through his Spirit - so that God then "lives" or "dwells" as a Father within his people. Paul states this clearly:

For through him (Christ) we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Eph. 2:18-22).

It is through the gift of God's own Spirit that believers have direct "access" to God as their personal Father and that God "lives" in his people. The key to all of this, of course, is that God himself is Spirit and that those who receive his Spirit are part of his family. Rather than seeking unity in post-biblical creeds we should recognize that for Christians spiritual unity *already* exists and it is this which we are exhorted to "keep". For the earliest Christians practical unity proceeded from the truth that they were *already* a part of God's family. As believers in Christ they had received God's Spirit and were thus able to exclaim, "Abba, Father."

With this truth as their foundation the first century believers could then proceed to work outwards to build unity within God's family on a practical basis. Always though, it was the truth that they had *already* received the "firstfruits of the

Spirit" - with the final harvest of their inheritance still to come - that was the basis of their existence as God's family. Thus, practical unity proceeded from spiritual reality, as Paul wrote:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:3-6).

In sum, Christian unity is built on God the Father's plan and corresponding action to bring about a family of children through the redemptive work of his Son. This becomes effective as a spiritual reality for believers in Christ through the gift of God's Spirit. In this way, all of God's children become "one in Christ" and can proceed from this foundation to bring about the practical unity of God's family in everyday life. The goal in this practical unity is to be "imitators of God as dear children" (Eph. 5:2) and thus to show forth his nature and character to the world.

The God of the Bible: His Nature and Character

When the Bible speaks of the nature¹ and character of God it always does so in simple and clear terms, without philosophical language. God is presented throughout the Bible as the creator, sustainer and ruler of the universe. He is the almighty God for whom nothing is too difficult. In addition, God is said to be "love," "light" and "spirit." All of these being simple descriptions of a God who is both transcendent and personal. In short, he is a God of power, love, and holiness who constantly desires the best for his people. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* summarizes God's nature and character for us:

The OT contains no all-embracing definition of the concept of God. On the other hand, it makes an extensive range of statements which testify to the being of God and have their basis in the divine

¹It may very well be that to use the word "nature" in describing God's "being" is misleading. I'm not at all sure that the biblical writers would have been happy with the use of such a term about God. The word "nature" is used in this article for lack of a better alternative - or, for lack of precise understanding on my own part.

revelation. Nor is there in the OT any theogony; it does not go beyond the assertion that God is. He is the first and the last (Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12), the eternal, the almighty and the living one (Ps. 36:10), the creator of the heaven and earth (Gen. 1:1; 2:4, etc.), the Lord, who guides the destinies of the nations, but who has made Israel a people for his own possession (Exod. 19:5f.). Israel, stands, therefore, under his special protection. Yahweh not only leads, guides and gives Israel his promises; he also imposes his judgments when he [Israel] goes his own way. God is the commanding and demanding God who makes his will known and demands obedience. The history of Israel is the history of God with this people. Thus Israel's belief in God is founded on a theology of history.

It expresses a conception of God as personal, that is capable of all the emotions that a person can have: love, anger, repentance and other emotions. But even if human characteristics can be attributed to him, he cannot be compared with any human being (Hos. 11:9). The transcendent God who dwells in light, where no one can approach, is exalted above time and space and is therefore unique in his Godhead, not to be portrayed or localized (Ex. 20:4). He is the eternal king (Isa. 52:7) who rules over all the kingdoms of the world (Isa. 37:16).

The most fundamental feature of God's being is expressed by the word "holy". In the OT this has become the characteristic attribute of God. He is the Holy One (Isa. 40:25; Hab. 3:3; Hos. 11:9). But the holy, transcendent God steps out of his concealment through his word and his acts of revelation, and repeatedly communicates with his people in demonstrations of power and glory.

The holy God is just in all that he does (cf. Ps. 7:11). He is the judge who condemns unrighteousness and to whom man has to answer. But the OT testifies to his grace and mercy (e.g. Ex. 34:6; Ps. 103:8). He comforts the pious (Job 15:11), blesses him and helps him in his need (Pss. 45:7; 90:1; 94:22). Through the personal relationship between God and his people there is created an I-Thou relation between God and the individual believer who can turn to him in prayer in all his needs.

God in the OT is also called Father; he is the father of the people of Israel (Ex. 4:22f.; Deut. 32:6; Isa. 63:16; Jer. 31:9; Hos. 11:1). However, a full knowledge of the divine grace and love which embraces the whole world is only arrived at through the revelation of the new covenant.

Nevertheless, the OT testifies to the fact that God forgives transgressions and sins (Ex. 34:6f.). He has mercy on his people in everlasting grace (Isa. 54:8), and in particular takes up the cause of the poor and needy, and widows and orphans (Isa. 49:13; Ps. 146:9). Therefore, even in the OT God is not just a dreaded enemy of man in his unholiness; he also makes it possible for him to trust and love, because he himself loves his chosen people.

The NT rests firmly on the foundation of the OT, when it speaks about God, but its emphases are new. He is the God who is near, the Father of Jesus Christ, who justifies freely by his grace. His action in election bursts all claims to exclusiveness. But it is the same God who reveals himself here as in the OT, and whose plan of salvation, there promised, comes to fulfillment here [Vol. 2, pp. 70-73]

This biblical understanding of God contrasts sharply with the pagan religions of biblical times and with ancient Greek philosophical notions about God. It is useful to note the contrasts so that we are aware of that which is not "of God." Again, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* summarizes the ancient Greek development of the concept of "god" - a concept that was to have enormous influence on the post-biblical Christian understanding of God and comes to us today most vividly in the popular New Age movement:

Greek religion was polytheistic. The gods were represented in anthropomorphic form as personal beings who exercised a determining influence on the world and fate of men, but who themselves were dependent on a superior fate. As they were not creator-gods, they were not thought of as outside the universe and transcendent. The cosmos included both gods and men. The influence of the gods was not universal, but was limited by their natures and attributes. They were not righteous in the OT sense. The Greek gods had form. Consequently, the statement "God is spirit" (John 4:24) could not be applied to them. From Aeschylus onwards the different gods came increasingly to be identified. Their convergence into one divine being was prepared by the pre-Socratic thinkers and the ideas of classical tragedy.

The Greek philosophical understanding of god was non-personal. Philosophers sought the origin of all things and the principle that shaped the world. In the process of rationalizing and

moralizing an important transformation of the Greek concept of god took place. The divine forms were spiritualized and finally replaced by general concepts like "world reason," "the divine," and "being," which influenced and formed the world as powers giving it meaning and creating order. In Hellenistic syncretism the various Greek and non-Greek divinities were assimilated and even equated as a result of the recognition that behind the diverse names stood the same entities. This is particularly clear in the Isis cult. Not infrequently these tendencies lead to the honoring of one godhead as the divine All. The development reached its height in Neo-Platonism, where the divine is the universal One which has no objective existence or personality. It is being itself which is manifest through a series of hypostases and emanations in the world, since it is the ground and force behind everything that is [Vo. 2, p. 66-67].

It is not difficult to see how these Greek philosophical notions influenced the post-biblical councils of Nicea (A.D. 325) and Chalcedon (A.D. 451) in their debates about the nature of God. Nor is it difficult to see the roots of the present day New Age movement, along with similar movements throughout history, in these notions.

In short, the contrast between the God of the Bible with these Greek conceptions of god (s) could hardly be sharper. The God of the Bible is not an all encompassing "principle" or "divine All". Nor does he exist as different *hypostases* ("persons"). Instead, the Bible insists that God is a single living being - or "person" - who is the creator of the world, the Lord of the world and the personal Father of his children. As such he is at work in history and is guiding history to his own appointed goals. These goals most definitely include a "oneness" for the world, but because of the sin and evil of this age it is a oneness that can only be achieved in Christ. In short, God's goal is to "bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 1:10).

God, the Father, is Spirit

One of the simplest statements about God's nature and character is found in the New Testament in John 4:23-24 and it should be emphasized because it shows God to be both "spirit" and a personal "Father" to his people:

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship him in spirit and in truth.

Rather than simply being a metaphysical statement about God, this statement is made in relationship to God's desire to be a Father who can fellowship with his people in an intimate way - "in spirit and in truth." Thus, God is shown not only to be spirit in nature, but also to be a personal God who, through the impartation of his own Spirit, can have an intimate relationship with his people. However, since God is "spirit" he is also invisible. Thus, he must manifest or reveal himself to his people in some way if he is to be understood. Biblically, this is accomplished in several ways.

First, God's "eternal power and deity" can be seen and understood by all people from the natural world of God's creation (Rom 1:19-20; Acts 17:24-28). This should "by nature" lead a person to "seek" God and "find him" for "he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:26-27). In relation to his own people, Israel, God also revealed himself in the OT through his word - both spoken and written - and, through his mightily acts of power on their behalf. In the NT, however, this word, or self-expression, of God reaches its pinnacle when "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Jesus Christ, God's unique Son, revealed God's character and nature to the his people - and to the world - in a way so full that he could state, "he who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). In short, Jesus "made known" God his Father to the world more fully than he had ever been known before. As the Gospel of John declares:

No one has ever seen God; God's only Son, he who is nearest to the Father's heart, has made him known (John 1:18 REB).

No one has ever seen God, but he who is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15) made him known. And yet this also is the work of God, for Christ's conception, anointing and ministry were all accomplished through the power of God's Spirit. As Acts states,

... God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with Holy Spirit and power, and ... he went

around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him (Acts 10:38).

As wonderful as this was God did not stop with Christ's ministry for it has always been his goal to bring into existence a family of children who would manifest his character to the world and who could worship him "truthfully by the Spirit of God" (Phil. 3:3). Through his death and resurrection Jesus is the "firstborn among many brothers," thus opening the way for a new humanity - a family of God's children - "conformed to the likeness of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). Thus, that same character and nature of God - which are revealed most fully in God's unique Son, Jesus Christ - are now revealed in all of God's children through his Spirit. As I John states:

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God,

God lives in him and he in God (I John 4:12-115).

This is the "unity of the Spirit" which the New Testament proclaims. In short, the one God of the Bible, the creator of the heavens and the earth, is now our personal Father. He has manifested himself to the world through his Son, Jesus Christ, and now manifests himself to the world through us by way of his Spirit. In this way God our Father has brought into being a "unity of the Spirit" which magnifies his own nature and character to the world. As Jesus prayed,

I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:20-23)