



WHO IS GOD?

THEME

1

Old Testament Witness

PART

1

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

In this theme we consider a very basic and important Christian issue, the doctrine of God. Eventually we will see that the church responded to the question, “Who is God?” by way of the doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinity is a very complex and difficult teaching. It took several centuries for the church to come to a full articulation of its faith. Today, the categories and language of the doctrine may sound outdated or very foreign. The Trinity is important, however, because it is an understanding of God that sets Christianity apart from all other faiths. As we study the question of God in this theme, it will be necessary for the group to keep before them the concern of why this doctrine is so important and what practical differences it makes for our lives and faith.

The theme is unfolded by the three chapters examining the Old and New Testament witnesses to God and the church’s understanding of the Trinity. While each chapter is complete in itself, they all coalesce to give a full picture. Throughout, biblical citations are given. It is important to urge the group to study these in preparation for discussion. The references illustrate the statements made and provide the images from which the picture of God emerges. Sometimes multiple references are given, each of which relates to some aspect of the statements made.

It is also important for leaders to indicate at the start that for this theme, and for others that follow, the language of Christian theology will vary from that of the Bible. Theology uses terms and concepts not explicitly found in Scripture. The purpose of this study is to understand the biblical bases on which major Christian doctrines are built. Theological language seeks to be true to the biblical materials. At the same time, the biblical information provides the data out of which Christian doctrines are

constructed. As we study these themes, we should always keep testing the doctrines to see how they concur with understandings of the biblical texts.

Old Testament Perspectives on God

This chapter introduces dimensions of the Old Testament understanding of God. Since the topic is so extensive, it would be impossible to cover the whole range and magnitude of Old Testament teachings. What is presented is oriented toward features that are important in later developments of the doctrine of the Trinity. It would be helpful to study this chapter once as if one had never heard of “God” before; and then again, in light of all the developed beliefs about God one already holds. This is another way of saying we need to read the Old Testament on the basis of its own merit, as well as in light of the New Testament and later Christian understandings.

It will be helpful for members of the group to realize that the Old Testament teaching forms the basis and background out of which the New Testament and the early church’s theological understanding of God arose. Early in its history the Christian church rejected the views of Marcion (died A.D. 160). He believed the Old Testament God was not the same as the New Testament God. He saw the God of the Old Testament as a God of wrath; the God of the New as a God of love. He taught that the Old Testament God of “Law” had nothing to do with the New Testament God of “Grace.” This view is still subtly held by many people today. It has led to a disregard for the Old Testament. Sometimes it is said that whereas the Old Testament deals with the physical world, the New Testament is a “spiritual” book. Like Marcion of old, people who hold this view deny the value of the Old Testament for faith today.

It would be interesting to talk about this attitude at some point in your group’s discussion. This session is an appropriate place to do so. A temptation toward “Marcionism” may at points be prominent in our churches. The group could be asked to keep a continuing eye out and an ear open for remarks and attitudes that treat the Old Testament like this. As we study Old Testament materials, we remember that the Hebrew Scriptures are fully authoritative for Christians and wonderfully relevant for our Christian lives. This chapter shows that our basic Christian faith in God has strong Old Testament roots. The major dimensions of Old Testament teaching are amplified and clarified in the New Testament, particularly in God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. This chapter tries to show how Old Testament images still speak to us today, even after the New Testament and centuries of church history.

In introducing the divisions of this chapter, it will be helpful to have members of the group consider each of the headings with the data presented and then to think ahead to see how these would be understood from a New Testament perspective. This exercise establishes an important interpretive tool for biblical and theological study. It encourages reading the Old Testament primarily on its own terms as the book of faith for the people of Israel. Yet it also reminds us that from a Christian point of view, the Old Testament points forward to the fulfillment of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Both dimensions for biblical study are significant and can enhance our outlook. While the New Testament and subsequently the church's understanding of God as developed in the doctrine of the Trinity reach beyond the Old Testament witness, both the New Testament writers and later theologians saw a continuity and a realization of the Old Testament vision of God in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Old Testament Faith and Our Own

One important part of this study is for us to ask ourselves why the different aspects of the Old Testament witness to God are important to us today. Suggest that all members of the group take each of the divisions of this chapter and ask: "Why is this aspect of God important to our faith?" "What does it mean to me that God is like this?" "How would my faith be changed if God were not like this?" To do this helps focus on the practical implications of our views of God. It also reminds us strongly that our theological views can have very important real-life consequences for us day by day. People of the Old Testament lived with a real sense of the presence, personality, and power of God in the midst of their community of faith and within their own lives. If our study can enhance this dimension in us and in our churches, we will find unexpected joys and treasures in our faith.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Cite several examples which show that the Old Testament is important for the church today.
2. Describe at least three characteristics of God in the Old Testament.

3. List several incidents from Scripture in which God is said to be at work in the world through God's word, God's wisdom and God's Spirit.
4. Indicate how two or three of the attributes of God mentioned in this part are important for faith today.

Resources You May Need

Chalkboard and chalk

Newsprint and markers

Worksheets with questions for discussing the subtitles of this part

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Ask participants for questions which arose from their reading in preparation for this session. List these on newsprint. Review the list and decide which ones can best be discussed during the session. Indicate that you will allow time at the close of the session to pursue those not previously mentioned.
2. In the second section of "Notes from the Author" Dr. McKim states, ". . . the Old Testament teaching forms the basis and background out of which the New Testament and the early church's theological understanding of God arose."

Read this statement to the group. Then lead a discussion on ways in which the Old Testament has been important in shaping the faith of members of the group using questions such as the following:

- How many of you have participated in a study of a book or theme from the Old Testament? What was the book or theme?
- When you think of your favorite books or passages from the Bible, which selections from the Old Testament are included?
- How many books of the Old Testament can you name? List them.
- Can you name a hymn which is based on a text or story from the Old Testament? What is the passage?

- Can you recall a recent sermon on the Old Testament?
What was the text or theme?
- Cite one passage from the Old Testament that has influenced your understanding of Jesus Christ or the church.

and/or

Present a minilecture on Marcion's view of the Old Testament and how the early church responded to his view. Most encyclopedias and introductory books on church history will provide the information you will need.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Divide the group into four smaller groups. Assign each group one of the first four sections of the chapter in the *Resource Book* ("There is One God," "God is the Creator," "God Reveals," "God is Personal"). Each group is to read its section and review the Bible references listed there. They are then to prepare a two- to three-minute summary of what their section says about God and appoint someone to share this summary with the larger group. About fifteen minutes should be sufficient for the small groups to do their work, but by now you will be able to tell when to reconvene the larger group to hear the summaries.

and/or

Write a different word from the Word List on the top of six sheets of newsprint and place them around the room. Ask members of the group to cluster around the word they are most interested in discussing. (You may have to request that some people move so that there are at least two persons for each word.)

The groups are to draw up a definition or description of the meaning of their terms, using the appropriate sections from the *Resource Book* and the Bible. They are to write these statements on the newsprint and present them to the whole group.

2. Introduce the person who agreed last week to present a brief review of God's covenant with Israel, using the Bible references in the sections in the *Resource Book* entitled "God's Covenant" and "God's Purposes." A copy of Theme 2, Part 1 of *The Bible in Depth* and a Bible dictionary, such as *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, will provide additional information.

and/or

Make a five-minute presentation summarizing Dr. McKim's remarks on God's word and God's wisdom as ways in which the divine purposes are carried out. A *Theological Wordbook of the Bible* by Alan Richardson will assist you in this assignment.

3. Assign the following Bible references to individuals or small groups. They are to read their reference and prepare a sentence about the activity of God's Spirit. After a few minutes, call out the references one at a time and ask for volunteers to read the references and their sentences aloud. If several persons have the same reference invite them to read their sentences also.

Judges 6:33-35

Isaiah 11:1-2

Judges 14:5-6

Isaiah 44:3

Ezekiel 36:26-30

Isaiah 61:1-4

Joel 2:28-29

or

Write the following four Bible references on a chalkboard or newsprint.

Judges 6:33-35

Isaiah 61:1-4

Ezekiel 36:26-30

Joel 2:28-29

Ask for volunteers to read each selection aloud to the group. After each reference is read, invite members of the group to describe the activity of God's Spirit in the passage. Record the responses and lead a discussion on how the work of the Spirit is related to God's work through God's word and God's wisdom.

4. List the nine subtitles from the chapter on newsprint or a chalkboard. ("There is One God", "God is the Creator", etc.) Then distribute worksheets with the following questions to each member of the group. (When you prepare the worksheets allow space after each question for participants to write answers. You may want to save the list of subtitles for an activity under Setting the Stage in the next session.)

- Why is this aspect of the Old Testament witness to God important for our faith today?
- What does it mean to me that God is like this?

- How would my faith be changed if God were not like this?

Ask each person to select at least two of the subtitles and prepare responses to the questions. After about ten minutes, read the first subtitle and invite persons to share their responses to the questions. Continue with the other subtitles for as long as you think is appropriate. If no one in the group has selected a particular subtitle for comment, give your own response or move to the next subtitle.

or

Select two or three of the subtitles of the chapter and lead a discussion with the whole group, asking each of the three questions about the subtitles you have chosen.

CLOSING

1. Discuss any remaining questions on the list begun at the start of the session.
2. Read Joel 2:28-29 and lead the group in a prayer asking God's Spirit to be with them in the coming week.

Supplementary Reading

Theological Turning Points, Chapter 1, "Trinitarian Controversy: Who Is God?"
Pages 4-8.

Christian Doctrine by Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1969), Chapter 5, "Who Is God?" Pages 89-97.

Faith Seeking Understanding, Chapter 4, "The Triune God." Pages 56-62.

Looking Ahead

In activity #1 under Exploring the Scripture in the next session, it is suggested that six persons give two- to three-minute summaries of the following subsections of the chapter: Mark, Matthew, Luke, Acts, Pauline Writings and John. See the activity for details.