

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>The Nicene Creed</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>3</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>1 Timothy 6:15, 16</b>		
<b>Date:</b>	<b>February 5, 2023 (a.m.)</b>		

### I BELIEVE IN ONE GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY

Christian Theology is organic in character. It is inter-related or inter-locked. What this means is that a defective understanding of one of the key Christian doctrines will directly impact the rest. This is particularly the case with the Biblical understanding of the doctrine of God. Noted New Testament scholar Donald Guthrie wrote, "The relevance of a right doctrine of God for an approach to NT theology may be illustrated as follows. A God who cares for his creatures is the God who acts to redeem them. A true understanding of the incarnation and therefore of the person of Christ is impossible if a wrong notion of God is maintained."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, a wrong notion of God will not only have a devastating effect on the critically important doctrines of Christ, sin, and salvation, but will also prevent us from seeing doctrines in their proper significance. Kuyper long ago declared, "The knowledge of God alone teaches you to distinguish between eminent, common, and less important interests in the Scriptures."<sup>2</sup> Swiss theologian Emil Brunner has alerted us to the danger of *theologism*, i.e., the danger of putting theology in the place of personal faith.<sup>3</sup> Simply lining up our theological ducks in a row is no guarantee that our faith is genuine saving faith. B. B. Warfield addressed this when he said, "It is sometimes said that some people love theology more than they love God. Do not let it be possible to say that of you. Love theology, of course; but love theology for no other reason than it is given to mortals, to know Him wholly."<sup>4</sup> We are witnessing the rise in many evangelical circles of the acceptance of "gay Christianity." A number of prominent evangelical colleges have already begun to amend their student handbooks to allow for gay acceptance as compatible with evangelical doctrine. Instead of seeking to conform their lifestyle to their theology they are forced to do just the opposite in order to maintain their "alternative lifestyle." Millard Erickson observes, "Our lifestyle can also affect our theology. The reason is that if we are committed to a given lifestyle and unwilling to alter that, then we will find a way to rationalize our theology so that it fits with how we want to live."<sup>5</sup>

- I. **THE DOCTRINE OF GOD: ITS FOUNDATIONAL CHARACTER.** The centrality of this doctrine in the early church is clearly seen in the opening statement of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." This doctrine is clearly out of focus today. There is, as Robert Morey has warned, "a battle of the gods that rages all around us today in which the historic Christian conception of God is being challenged by new views of God. The most important issue of our times is the contest between the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture and modern gods that man has made in his own image. The battlelines are clearly drawn between those who accept the God revealed in Scripture and those who accept gods that man has made on the basis of his own reason, intuition, and feelings."<sup>6</sup>

- II. **THE DOCTRINE OF GOD: ITS INFLUENCE ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.** “Biblical piety,” wrote Vos, “is God-centered.”<sup>7</sup> Scottish theologian James Orr once observed, “Christianity, it is sometimes said . . . is a life, not a creed; it is a spiritual system, and has nothing to do with dogmatic affirmations. But this is to confuse two things essentially different – Christianity as an inward principle of conduct, a subjective religious experience, on the one hand, and Christianity as an objective fact, or an historic magnitude, on the other. But can even the life be produced, or can it be sustained and nourished, without knowledge?”<sup>8</sup> How can true spirituality be divorced from the knowledge of God (theology)? “There can be no vital spirituality,” writes Donald Bloesch, “without a sound theology,”<sup>9</sup> – and there is no sound theology without a biblically sound doctrine of God.
- III. **THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD.** The fatherhood of God is spoken of in Scripture in a threefold sense.
- A. **The Fatherhood of God with Relation to the Son** (1 Corinthians 8:6; 1 John 1:3). There are so many passages in the New Testament where the titles *The Son* and *The Father* appear in juxtaposition. In the Gospel records we find Jesus using the term *Father* in a unique way (Matthew 11:27; Mark 12:6, 13:32, 14:41; Luke 2:44, 10:22; John 3:35, 5:20, 10:15, 14:9). Jesus called God *his own Father* (John 5:17-18). This means, as John Murray has noted, “that no other but the Father stood in this relation to Jesus the Son. Paul says *his own Son* (Romans 8:32) and this means that no other stands in this relation to the Father. God the Father has many sons by adoption and he will bring them all to glory. They are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ. But divine revelation permits no confusion to exist between the sonship of the only-begotten and that of the adopted. No other but the eternal Son is the Father’s *own Son*. Here is an ineffable and incomparable sonship (cf. John 1:14, 18, 3:16; 1 John 4:9).”<sup>10</sup>
- B. **The Fatherhood of God as the Creator.** (Malachi 2:10; James 1:17). God is the Father of all things by creation (Isaiah 64:8 and especially Acts 17:24-28). “There is,” wrote the Puritan William Bates, “an indelible character of dignity engraven in the reasonable nature by the hand of God. But since man turned rebel to his Creator and Father, this endearing, obliging relation aggravates his rebellion, but gives him no interest in the paternal love of God, of which he has made a deadly forfeiture.”<sup>11</sup>
- C. **The Fatherhood of God with Relation to Believers in Christ.** God is not in the *redemptive* sense the Father of all men, but only of believers. On the contrary, we are by *nature* not children of light, but of wrath (Ephesians 2:3). “When a penitent sinner trusts in the expiatory sacrifice of Jesus Christ, then the triune God becomes his Father in the high and endearing signification of the term, and the man becomes a child of God in the same signification”<sup>12</sup> (cf. Romans 8:14; Galatians 4:6-7; 1 John 3:9).

**CONCLUSION:** In a recent post at The Gospel Coalition, Trevor Wax made this important observation as it relates to the turnaround of Barnes & Noble due to the new CEO’s devotion to the love of books. There’s a lesson here for those of us who mourn the decline of church membership or grieve the reality of falling attendance at churches across the country. Surveying the cultural trends, we might be tempted to put our faith in something else, to focus our attention not on the Word and the sacraments but on extraneous things – our coffee, our music, or our programming. Over time, pastors in the fields of labor lose any sense of being a leader in *worship* and become managers of religious dispensaries, as if they oversee a supermarket of spiritual goods and services. Life can go on under these “dumbed down” circumstances, and churches may see attendance rise, but at what cost? At what point is the central purpose of the church lost, edged out by crowd-pleasing trinkets, just as Barnes & Noble has become, in the words of their CEO, “crucifyingly boring,” having lost confidence in the primary reason for its existence? Come what may, there’s no substitute for love. Loving God.

Loving to worship God. Loving to worship God *with his people*. Loving to hear God's Word and to feast on his goodness at the table. God forbid we lose the fire of love and hand down religious formulas that no longer burn within our hearts. Pastors, we are not baristas. We are not managers, marketers, or speech makers. We are worshipers. And unless we're filled with ardor and devotion for our task of leading our congregations into an encounter with the living God, our churches will never become an oasis of God-adoration in a parched and weary land of false worship. There's a lesson in the Barnes & Noble turnaround. Remember your first love. And don't lose sight of your ultimate purpose.<sup>13</sup> "I have often found," says good old John Bunyan, "that when I can say but this word *Father*, it doth me more good than if I called him by any other Scripture name. It is worth your noting, that to call God by this title was rare among the saints in Old Testament times. Seldom do you find him called by this name – no, sometimes not in three or four books; but now, in New Testament times, he is called by no name so often as this, both by the Lord Jesus himself, and by the apostles afterwards. Indeed, the Lord Jesus was the that first made the name common among the saints, and that taught them, both in their discourse, their prayers, and their writings, so much to use it; it being more pleasing to God, and discovering more plainly our interest in God, than any other expression. For by this one name, we are made to understand that all our mercies are the offspring of God, and that we also that are called are his children by adoption. Our psychologized culture conditions us to view fatherhood exclusively in terms of our personal experiences with our human fathers – and, of course, if your father was a bad father – figure then you supposedly cannot relate to God as a Father – worst of all, good Christians have bought into this dreadful notion! May God Himself give us wisdom and understanding that we may grasp the truth of God as our Father, the Father of all compassion and the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3)."<sup>14</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (IVP, 1981), p. 115.

<sup>2</sup>Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1968), p. 332. A failure to recognize this is found in the writings of Open-View theist (Open-view theism denies the historic Christian position that God possesses detailed and exhaustive knowledge of the future) John Sanders. He acknowledges that he has no very satisfactory response to the person who insists that the Bible really does teach the wrath of God, God's grace and sovereignty in election, crippling human depravity that includes noetic effects, and so forth. But he holds that many such doctrines are exegetically disputable. What is not disputable, he argues, is what the Bible says about the unconditional love of God, full of redemptive purpose. All the apparently exclusionist passages (e.g., John 14:6; Acts 4:12) he dismisses on the grounds that "it is not certain from these passages that one *must* hear of Christ in this life to obtain salvation. They simply say there is no other way to heaven except through the work of Christ; they do not say one has to know about that work in order to benefit from that work." See his *No Other Name: An Investigation Into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Eerdmans, 1992) and *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (IVP, 1998). Cf. also D.A. Carson's critique in his *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Zondervan, 1996), p. 285.

<sup>3</sup>E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics*, Vol. 1 (Westminster, 1946), p. 41.

<sup>4</sup>*Selected Shorter Writings of B. B. Warfield II* (rpt. P&R, 1970), p. 480.

<sup>5</sup>M. J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Baker, 1998), p. 18. I am indebted to Erickson for the substance of the following outline.

<sup>6</sup>R. A. Morey, *Battle of the Gods: The Gathering Storm in Modern Evangelicalism* (Crown Publications, 1989), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup>Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1948), p. 154.

<sup>8</sup>J. Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1948), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup>Donald Bloesch, *Crumbling Foundations: Death & Rebirth in An Age of Upheaval* (Zondervan, 1984), p. 111.

<sup>10</sup>*Collected Writings of John Murray III* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), p. 215.

<sup>11</sup>*The Complete Works of William Bates IV* (rpt. Sprinkle, 1990), p. 298.

<sup>12</sup>W. G. T. Shedd, *Sermons to the Spiritual Man* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), p. 54.

<sup>13</sup>T. Wax, *Lesson for The Church from The Barnes & Noble Turnaround*, @ The Gospel Coalition, January 24, 2023.

<sup>14</sup>*The Works of John Bunyan I* (rpt. Baker, 1977), p. 244.

