

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Practicing Wesleyan-Holiness
Spiritual Formation



SESSION 5
What Is God Like?

NOTICE TO CLT PARTICIPANTS AND EDUCATORS

This is a contract. By using these materials you accept all the terms and conditions of this Agreement. This Agreement covers all Leader's Guides, Student Guides, and instructional resources included in the Continuing Lay Training (CLT) website.

Upon your acceptance of this Agreement, Continuing Lay Training grants to you a nonexclusive license to use these curricular materials provided that you agree to the following:

1. USE OF THE MODULES.

- You may distribute educational materials in electronic form to students or other educational providers.
- You may make and distribute electronic or paper copies to students for the purpose of instruction, as long as each copy contains this Agreement and the same copyright and other proprietary notices pertaining to the Module. If you download the educational materials from the Internet or similar online source, you must include the CLT notice for the Module with any online distribution and on any media you distribute that includes the educational content.
- You may translate, adapt, and/or modify the examples and instructional resources for the purpose of making the instruction culturally relevant to your students. However, you must agree that you will not sell these modified materials without express, written permission from CLT.

2. COPYRIGHT.

The material is owned by CLT and is protected by United States Copyright Law and International Treaty provisions. Except as stated above, this Agreement does not grant you any intellectual property rights in the Module.

3. RESTRICTIONS.

- You may not sell copies of these educational materials in any form except to recover the minimum reproduction cost of electronic media or photocopy expense.
- You may not modify the wording or original intent of the educational material for commercial use.

THANK YOU

Continuing Lay Training would like to thank Clergy Development for granting permission to modify and adapt their course of study materials for our educational purposes. Their willingness to partner with us is sincerely appreciated.

What Is God Like?

SESSION OVERVIEW

The God of the Bible

The Articles of Faith

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should be able to:

- cite and discuss some of the key elements in the nature of the God revealed in the Bible and described in the Articles of Faith of the Church of the Nazarene.
- have an opportunity to open your heart to the holy, loving, seeking God of the Bible.
- present a more authentic vision of the Christian God in your ministry situations.

What Is God Like?

INTRODUCTION



What is God like? What is His nature? How does He relate to people like us? To the world? The answer to such questions is utterly crucial to growth in grace and spiritual formation.

Following are some contemporary statements about God cited by Stanley J. Grenz in *What Christians Really Believe and Why* (73-76). Which of these, if any, echoes your own beliefs?

“God is actually in the flowers and the growing grass and all the little chirping, singing things.” Agnes Sanford, charismatic Episcopal missionary

In the short story, *Teddy*, a spiritually sensitive boy gets an insight while watching his sister pour a glass of milk. “All of a sudden I saw that she was God and the milk was God. I mean, all she was doing was pouring God into God.” J. D. Salinger, American Jewish author

In *The Color Purple*, Shug Avery says, “God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. . . I believe that God is in everything.” Alice Walker, African American novelist

“No matter how much we may like to pussyfoot around it . . . God wants us to become Himself (or Herself or Itself).” M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*

“Be still and know that you are God,” teaches Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a rewriting of Ps. 46:10, which says, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

“There need be no guilt or recrimination, where at last the self is indistinguishable from God.” Alan Watts, Episcopal priest turned Zen master.

This sort of talk is labeled the new immanentalism. It emphasizes the immanence (nearness) of God to almost full exclusion of the transcendence of God. All is one and all is God is a popular manifestation among pluralists and devotees of Eastern religions. Immanentalism in evangelical circles acts itself out as God the backslapping buddy, God as my girlfriend, or God the doting grandparent.

THE GOD OF THE BIBLE

NOTES

“I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling . . . ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke” (Isa. 6:1-4).

THE ESSENCE OF THE GOD OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH: GOD IS HOLY

Holy, holy, holy—what does it mean that God is holy? Does it mean that He is more honest, more moral, or more just than humans? He is all those, of course, but the term holy means so much more. It is more a religious term than a moral term. *Greathouse, Wholeness in Christ, 13*

Rudolf Otto and John G. Gammie described the overwhelming holiness of God using these Latin terms:

- *Tremendum*: awfulness, plenitude of power that evokes dread and fear
- *Majestas*: absolute unapproachableness, overpoweringness, plenitude of being
- *Energicum*: energy that the mystic experiences as consuming fire, urgency, vitality, force, energy
- *Mysterium*: being the wholly other, in a category separate to himself, transcendent, supernatural
- *Fascinans*: compelling, fascinating, spiritually intoxicating, rapture, exaltation

In Exodus 19, we see one of the early self-revelations of God. A careful reading of this chapter reveals all five of the preceding dimensions of God’s holiness. *Greathouse, Wholeness in Christ, 17-19.*

As used in the Old Testament, holy had three dimensions.

- It means *separation*. God is separate and distinct from all of creation. God alone is holy. Any human holiness is merely a gift derived from God. Nothing about us is inherently or naturally holy.


NOTES

- The holiness of God is sometimes synonymous with the burning splendor of the presence of the Lord.
- God's holiness refers to His purity. God's holiness is the opposite of uncleanness and carries connotations of justice, ceremonial purity, integrity, and upright morality.

A word used hundreds of times in the Bible to describe God's holiness is *Qodesh*. It means separate, separated, or wholly other. This simply indicates that God is above, beyond, different, and distinct from any other being in all creation. God inhabits a category all by himself. God alone is holy. Holiness is not something God has. It is not something that we attribute to Him. Holiness is more than an attribute of God. Holiness is what God is.

As theologian J. Kenneth Grider says, "Holiness is what God is in His *isness*." When theologians say that God is transcendent, they mean God is above and beyond all we can ever think, know, or say about Him. Transcendence has to do with the power, majesty, energy (a flaming fire), and the supernatural, dreaded, and compelling presence of God the Creator of the universe.

Since God dwells in a completely exclusive category, He is sharply distinguished from the natural world. Those who teach that your rosebush and the snake under it swallowing a robin's egg are all God or a part of God find themselves teaching an unbiblical doctrine.

GOD IS LOVE

In His very essence, God is not only blazing holiness but also agape love. Roderick T. Leupp writes, "Holiness alone would annihilate us. Love alone would trivialize our sin. It is a holy God against whom we have sinned, but it is a loving God who forgives our sin and remakes us from within." *From Reflecting God*, 44.

Fortunately, God has spoken His holiness in a human idiom. That miracle is the Person of Jesus Christ. God's glory, majesty, and awe are not diminished, but heightened in Him. The holy transcendent God is far above and beyond us; the loving immanent God reaches out to us. *From Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, 190.

H. Ray Dunning notes, "As holiness is the starting point, so love is the high point in the biblical unfolding of the nature of God." *From Wesley Hymns (Kansas City: Lillenas)*, 118.

Charles Wesley wrote, "Pure universal Love Thou art. . . Thy nature and Thy name is Love."


NOTES

But what does all that mean to you and me? Everything—because, as St. Augustine put it, God “loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love.”

GOD IS THREE-IN-ONE

Christians believe that the one God of the Bible has revealed himself to us as Father, Son, and Spirit. Pluralists today naively claim that Christians and adherents of pagan gods from Han spirits to Ogun to Vishnu all worship the same God and end up in the same heaven. But at the heart of our Christian faith is the proclamation that the only true God is the one revealed in the Bible through Jesus Christ. Stanley J. Grenz summarizes belief in the One and Triune God in these words:

Christians can conclude that according to the revelation in Jesus, the only God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This God is one, for the three share the same will, nature, and essence. Christians are not polytheists, for we do not worship three distinct Gods . . . we do not serve some generic “God” but the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Belief in the Trinity is more than saying there are three ways of experiencing God. The three Persons of the Trinity are eternally united in the ideal divine community. God is the eternal community of love, and God is love and was love even before our universe came into existence, even before there were lost sinners to love. The doctrine of the Trinity shows us that isolated discipleship is not what God intended for us. While honoring our personhood, God calls us to fellowship within the family of faith that echoes the Divine Community above. Proper teaching of the Trinity keeps us from pitting one Person against another within the Divine Community. The Father, Son, and Spirit, the persons of the Trinity do not act independently. We cannot separate the One God. Wherever we find one Person of the Trinity all are present. The Athanasian Creed declares, “Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit . . . the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God.”

That’s why it is ludicrous for a Sunday School paper that I once read to say, “God killed Jesus for your sins!” The second graders for whom this was intended would doubtless feel sorry for Jesus and resent God the Father. No, every Person within the Trinity acted in unison as God absorbed within himself the suffering required for our redemption. *From Grenz, What Christians Really Believe and Why, 71.*

Further, adequate teaching about the Trinity protects us from an icy deism or a sentimental pantheism. The Deists’ God is “watching us from a distance,” as Bette Midler’s song says, but never gets involved. Pantheism teaches, “All is God and


NOTES

God is all." Thus, the crucial doctrine of the Trinity keeps a wholesome balance between the transcendent holiness and the loving immanence of God. The Celtic Christians of old spoke of the Trinity in such natural and devotional terms that faith is not strained:

Three folds in the cloth, yet only one napkin is there
 Three joints in the finger, but still only one finger fair
 Three leaves of the shamrock, yet no more than one shamrock to wear
 Frost, snowflakes, and ice, all in water their origin share
 Three Persons in God; to one God alone we make prayer.
From Reflecting God, 46.

THE ATTRIBUTES AND ACTIVITIES OF GOD

Our understanding of God is always incomplete. A God who can be mastered is no longer God. But biblical faith affirms that the very essence of God as He has revealed himself is centered in these three words: Holy, Love, Trinity. But we have also learned more.

GOD IS GOOD

"He is good: his love endures forever" (2 Chron. 7:3).

Unlike the Force in *Star Wars*, the deities of Traditional African Religion, the Hindu gods, and the New Age godlings, the Christian God is good—all good. The Force in George Lucas's classic space story can produce a moral model like Luke Skywalker and at the same time make an arch villain like Darth Vader. Lucas's Force is "beyond good and evil encompassing both." *From Grenz, 79.*

New Age gurus teach that negative experiences such as hunger, abuse, and rape are just as much a part of God as those experiences that seem good. Hindu teacher Swami Vivekananda tells us that God may manifest himself as Evil as well as Good. Eshu, the nearest thing in Traditional African Religion to the Satan of the Bible, is, strangely enough, also capable of great good. *From Reflecting God, 44-45.*

The Christian God is good through and through. His constant righteousness is the measure for all moral conduct for human beings. The adherents of the gods who are good on Monday and Wednesday and evil on Tuesday and Thursday will have to stand in bewildered silence when Christians sing, "God Is So Good."


NOTES
GOD IS SOVEREIGN CREATOR

“By him all things were created” (Col. 1:16).

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1).

No white-coated scientist laboring in the lab, no fevered vision of a New Age sycophant meditating in the noonday sun can ever change that. Since God is love, all His acts are loving. Thus, creation was a gracious act of divine love. Since God is Creator, He is also Sovereign. The Creator-Owner of the world sets the standards for our world. Our Sovereign is unchangeable (immutable). That is, His loving intention for creation never changes. Ever and always, He seeks what is best for us.

GOD IS PERSONAL

“The Lord appeared . . . and said, ‘I am God Almighty,’” (Gen. 17:1).

Since we were created as persons, we can only relate to God through the prism of personhood. Since God, who created us in His own image, is also personal, we can relate to Him. If God is not personal, no vital experience of God is possible for us.

This truth is evident in scripture. “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him . . . We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:16, 19). Surely this describes a relationship among persons. That God relates to us as person-to-person makes all the difference. Buddhists, Hindus, New Age practitioners, and many postmodern spiritualists speak of a god who is impersonal. If God is all and all is God, our ultimate destiny is to merge mindlessly into some impersonal nirvana. If so, human personhood is merely extra baggage to be lugged on an endless journey to oblivion.

GOD IS TRUTH, RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND MERCY

“The Lord is righteous, he loves justice” (Ps. 11:7).

Holiness and love form the essence of who God is. They are expressed in truth, righteousness (justice), and mercy. These are often called the moral attributes of God. The Lord reveals His truth, righteousness, and mercy to us so that we, who are to reflect His character, will know how to behave. *From Reflecting God, 51.*

 **NOTES**

The picture of the God you long for is beginning to emerge. There is a God-shaped vacuum in our hearts that aches to know God, to walk with Him. *Paco, all is forgiven. If you forgive me, too, please meet me at La Estrella Cafe at noon on Thursday. I love you. Your Father.* This ad was placed in a newspaper in Madrid, Spain, by a father pleading for his son to come home. According to *Pursuit* magazine, 800 Pacos showed up at La Estrella Cafe at noon on Thursday. All were seeking reconciliation with their fathers.

THE ARTICLES OF FAITH

NOTES

Consider the following Articles of Faith. For a more in-depth study, refer to regular and theological dictionaries (i.e. *Beacon Dictionary of Theology*).

THE TRIUNE GOD

We believe in one *eternally existent, infinite God*, Sovereign of the Universe; that He only is God, *creative and administrative, holy* in nature, attributes, and purpose; that He, as God, is *Triune in essential being*, revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

JESUS CHRIST

We believe in Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Triune Godhead; that He was *eternally* one with the Father; that He became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and was *born of the Virgin Mary*, so that two whole and perfect natures, that is to say the Godhead and manhood, are thus *united in one Person* very God and very man, the God-man. We believe that Jesus Christ *died for our sins*, and that He truly *arose from the dead* and took again His body, together with all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature, wherewith He *ascended* into heaven and is there engaged in *intercession* for us.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Triune Godhead, that He is *ever present* and *efficiently active* in and with the Church of Christ, *convincing* the world of sin, *regenerating* those who repent and believe, *sanctifying* believers, and *guiding* into all truth as it is in Jesus.

HOLY TRINITY SUNDAY WORSHIP SERVICE

The trinity is not something upon which we reflect deeply too often. Many of us chalk it up to a mystery and move on. Sometimes we become in function at least people who focus on one aspect of God. We can be Jesus only in our prayers and songs. It is important that we consider deeply the beauty of the trinity. It is also important that we wrestle with concepts that will always contain some mystery.

On the Christian calendar—followed by both Protestants and Catholics—Holy Trinity Sunday is the first Sunday after Pentecost. It usually comes around June 1. The Revised Common Lectionary provides readings and sermon texts that

**NOTES**

journey, more or less through the Bible in a three-year cycle. Pastors following the lectionary will plan a worship service and a sermon once each year on the Holy Trinity. The lectionary provides each year a cluster of Old Testament and New Testament texts that teach about the nature and acts of the Father, Son, and Spirit. This can be a great resource for the study of the trinity. An internet search for trinity Sunday will connect you to all sorts of reflections on this subject. As always when searching the internet check the source of your information.

CLOSING THOUGHT

As we are developing in faith, many of us will focus on one aspect of God. There are those who truly only feel intimate when calling upon Jesus, others who are more comfortable with holy, transcendent, God the creator, and those whose prayers refer to the Holy Spirit. Each of us are challenged to stretch our vocabulary and imaginations that we might begin to encounter God in a fuller way.

Pause for a moment and try to remember a hymn or chorus that calls us to a Trinitarian worship. Whether it is a chorus like “Father, I Adore You” or a hymn like “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty” meditate on the words that feel the most foreign to your tongue.

May the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit bless you in this time of contemplation.

Go in peace.

The blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
remain with you always.

APPLICATION



NOTES

1. Suppose you had to explain the first three Nazarene Articles of Faith to a class of 12-year-olds. Decide the most important words and concepts to be explained to your class of preteens. Consider:
 - Which concepts would be most easily grasped by 12-year-olds?
 - Which terms or ideas are the hardest to explain?
 - Which ideas do preteens most need to know?
 - Earlier we saw that Holiness, Love, and Trinity were the very essence of God's being as taught by the Scriptures and the Christian faith. Which of these is most emphasized in the three Articles of Faith? Which is stressed least? How would this affect teaching of the 12-year-old?
2. Using one of the scripture passages below, make an outline and preparation for teaching a session on the Trinity (any age group) using the concepts you developed from this session.

Select one of these passages for the text:

- Matt. 28:16-20
- 2 Cor. 13:4-14
- Gal. 4:1-7
- Study the passage(s) thoroughly and prayerfully.
- State the theme.
- Write out the objectives.
- Write out the introduction.
- Create session body.
- Write the conclusion.

Be prepared to discuss your essay with your mentor.

 **NOTES****JOURNALING**

Note: Throughout your work in this module, it is suggested you keep a journal. This is an important tool in the study of spiritual formation. Journaling is a tool to help you slow down in your studies and listen to your heart, soul, mind, and most importantly to God.

Record in your journal any corrections, adjustments, or expansions this session brought to your concept of God.

SUGGESTED READING

- William Greathouse, *Wholeness in Christ* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1998), chapter 1, 11-26.
- Stanley J. Grenz, *What Christians Really Believe and Why* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), chapter 4, 63-84.
- Roderick T. Luepp, *Knowing the Name of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1996).
- The Apostles Creed.
- The Nicene Creed.
- Athanasian Creed.

EXAM



NOTES

1. Immanentalism in evangelical circles acts itself out as God the backslapping buddy.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. Christians are polytheists.
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. Transcendent means that God is above and beyond.
 - A. True
 - B. False
4. Every Person within the Trinity acts in unison.
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. Christians believe all religions worship the same God.
 - A. True
 - B. False
6. Our understanding of God is always incomplete.
 - A. True
 - B. False
7. The Holy Spirit is like the Force in *Star Wars*.
 - A. True
 - B. False
8. Biblical faith affirms that the very essence of God as He has revealed himself is centered in these three words: Holy, Love, Trinity.
 - A. True
 - B. False
9. *Tremendum* means _____.
 - A. absolute
 - B. awefulness
 - C. wholly other
 - D. compelling

 NOTES

10. *Mysterium* means _____.
- A. wholly other
 - B. absolute
 - C. awefulness
 - D. compelling
11. Holy, as used in the Old Testament, had three dimensions. Which of the following is NOT one of them?
- A. separation
 - B. burning splendor of the presence of the Lord
 - C. purity
 - D. love
12. We believe the Triune God is NOT _____.
- A. one *eternally existent, infinite God*
 - B. *Sovereign* of the Universe
 - C. *Triune in essential being*
 - D. revealed in order of importance
13. We believe Jesus Christ is NOT _____.
- A. the third Person of the Triune Godhead
 - B. eternally one with the Father
 - C. very God and very man
 - D. incarnate

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Present and discuss the teaching session outline you created.
2. Do an internet search for a sermon on the Trinity or ask your pastor for a copy of her or his last sermon on the subject. Read and discuss the sermon with your mentor.