

SECTION 4

Participant Pages

Readings for Huddle Participants



SouthBrook
CHRISTIAN CHURCH

SECTION 4:

THE COVENANT TRIANGLE

WHO IS GOD?

Of all the questions Scripture answers for us, this is the most basic, the most foundational. Our answer will determine what we believe about everything else.

For a variety of reasons, we all have a false or incomplete picture of God we carry around with us. See if you recognize any of these caricatures of God in whom you or someone else you know has believed:

The Workaholic Boss. “Go do good work. Don't get lazy. If you do an acceptable job you'll be on my good side. I'm busy, so don't call me unless you have a really big issue.”

The Punitive School Principal. “I'm watching you. I've got my paddle poised and ready for when you screw up.”

The Customer Support Rep. “Call me when you have problems. Otherwise, I won't expect to hear from you.”

GPS God. “Here's a bunch of instructions. Follow these and you'll get here someday.”

The Hippie Parent. “Whatever you want to believe is fine. Just follow your heart. You can decide what's right for you. I'll be happy whatever you choose.”

Dad Look-Alike. “I look a lot like your earthly dad. Wasn't around much? Neither am I. Didn't give you much affection? Neither will I. Only cared about your accomplishments? Me too. “

Irrelevant God. “I may be fun to talk about once in a while, but I don't have much practical value when it comes to living life everyday. I may not even exist. Doesn't really matter either way. Am I talking to myself?”

According to Scripture though, each of these caricatures is incomplete. If we have the wrong idea about God, it will affect how we view ourselves and ultimately how we live.

Now before we move on from here, why should we believe what our Scriptures, the Bible, says about God? Jesus' answer is simple: His resurrection. Jesus claimed to be God, and said He'd demonstrate it by physically rising from the dead.

The historical fact of Jesus' resurrection is the cornerstone of credence, the evidence we can stand on to know Jesus' testimony about reality is true. And Jesus pointed to the Scriptures as God's word. They are the authority on reality according to God, and give the character profile for who God is.¹

¹We don't have space here to go too far into how we know the resurrection happened; if you haven't got that settled yet, I'd encourage you to start there. You may want to read a book like “The Case for Christ” by Lee Strobel to gain some clarity, as you talk through that one with God and others.

About God's character, Scripture tells us...

He doesn't just want us to "do good work." He wants to restore value, meaning and purpose to our lives. —Ephesians 2:8-10

He's not just waiting to smack us upside the head when we make a mistake. He works to obliterate anything in our lives that isn't good for us or keeps us from Him.

—Hebrews 12:5-11

He doesn't just want us to call when we are in trouble. He wants to save our broken lives and make them whole. —Luke 19:10

He's not an indifferent parent. He is a loving, involved and gracious Father, who offers us a relationship with Himself through Jesus that we did nothing to earn.

—John 1:12

And He doesn't just offer us any relationship.

He offers us the deepest of all relationships.

He invites us to a *covenant*.

BECOMING ONE

A **covenant** is when two things that are separate become one. Here in the states, we sign lots of contracts. That's when two or more parties agree to agree on something. A covenant is different, and deeper. It's when two or more parties become something. It's when they make one new party out of the two.

Across the world and throughout history, people have done some pretty weird things to enter a covenant, or pact, to become "one with" another party. There's usually some kind of initiation, sometimes bizarre or even violent, and it often involves blood.

Here in the states...

You may have heard of **children** making cuts on their arm to become "blood brothers."

Fraternities often have extensive rituals including hazing for new pledges to become "one of" the house.

New York's **United Blood Nation**, a gang of the New York State Prison system, requires new recruits to "Blood in" to join. A recruit has to draw blood from another inmate, usually by slashing at someone's face.

In other places...

The Chinese Triad, a gang that rules the underground in parts of China, requires new recruits to drink the blood of other new recruits mixed with their own.

The Junky Funky Kids, a gang made up of children high school age and younger in Cape Town South Africa, have to survive a "beat in" to join. Full members form two lines, put a new recruit in the middle, and the recruit must endure a beating with fists, planks, and clubs for a set period of time, to prove they are strong enough to help a fellow gangster when needed.

In the time of Abraham, a tribe would enter a blood covenant with another tribe by cutting some animals in half, and forming an aisle to walk down by lining the halves up in two rows across from each other. The chieftain from each tribe would walk down the "aisle," stomping through the animal blood that had flowed there, and they'd meet together at one end. In this way, one chieftain communicated to the other, "Our tribe is now your tribe. All you have is ours. All we have is yours. And if we don't hold up our end of the deal, then like these animals are, so shall we be."²

Unfortunately, many of these covenants are pretty dark, and alter the direction of members' lives in destructive ways. Why would someone join a covenant such as the Chinese Triad in the first place?

Identity. Security. Protection. Belonging. Being in covenant gives one access to the other party's relationships and resources. The Junky Funky Kids gang, the most difficult for me to swallow of those mentioned, is mostly joined by children fleeing difficult family or living situations, looking for security, a new identity, someone to have their back, a place to belong.

On the flip side, some covenants are pretty great. One of my personal favorites is the one I have with my wife: Marriage.

When I said "I do" to Jody, everything changed. Like every covenant, one new unit, a family, was made out of two, and just like that...

Her family became my family.

My apartment became her apartment.

Her 1984 Diesel Volkswagen Rabbit became my Volkswagen Rabbit (50 miles/gallon was a nice marriage perk).

My unfashionable wardrobe became her unfashionable wardrobe (not that she wore any of it). Her college debt became my college debt.

My last name became her last name.

All that I had was now Jody's. All that Jody had was now mine. We now had complete access to one another's lives. With that access came a new sense of belonging, security, and freedom.

God was actually the Designer of this covenant called marriage. He designed it in the very beginning.

*That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become **one flesh**.* —Genesis 2:24

Marriage is like an invisible house, blessed by God, in which a man and woman dwell together. It provides shelter, a place of belonging, and a stable environment to grow a family.

It is also one of the clearest pictures of the kind of relationship God offers us with Himself through Jesus.

In Scripture, Jesus refers to Himself as "the Bridegroom (or just groom)." His church, those who follow Him, is the bride. From His own broken body, He created the aisle of blood for He and us to walk down together. His blood paid for our sin, and His

²You can read about this type of covenant in Genesis 15, where God makes the mind-boggling offer to enter this type of covenant with Abraham! The God of the universe entered a covenant with Abraham. This meant Abraham and his children now had access to God and all His resources, and all Abraham had was God's. In this passage, God made three promises to Abraham, that were all ultimately fulfilled in Christ. Through Christ, we are children of Abraham, and have full access to God and His kingdom forever.

resurrection conquered it, giving us access to an abundant life, together with Him. Placing our faith in Jesus and His work on the cross for us is how we walk the aisle, forming a forever bond with God.

And now He, the God of the universe, says to us, “Beloved, I am Yours. And You are mine. Let’s share everything we each have, and enjoy each other forever.” He loves us with a fierce, jealous love.

And that’s not the only picture of covenant God gives us to help us understand what we now have with God through Jesus. There’s another kind of covenant relationship some of us have experienced on earth that is just as relevant to helping us understand—maybe even more so.

It’s the covenant of **Adoption**.

GOOD, GOOD FATHER.

In January 2004, while living in Monterrey, Mexico, a 9-month-old boy appeared on the landscape of Jody’s and my life.

I remember just where I met him the first time. He was sitting in our friend Julie’s lap in the baby rocks (that’s what we called the pea gravel that surrounded the little swing set on the property where we lived).

“Where’d that little guy come from?”

“His aunt brought him here. His mom wasn’t able to take care of him, so we’re trying to find a place for him to stay until we find a more permanent solution. His name is Julian.”

The infant gave me the most enormous, mirth-filled smile I had ever received from a person that size. It made me smile back.

I walked over to the baby rocks to take a turn holding the happy little guy. I took him from Julie—and was instantly shocked. He weighed nothing! I came to discover that baby Julian was extremely under-nourished. He weighed around 12 pounds at 10 months. Because of some difficulties in his home, he hadn’t been fed much. He also had hardly ever been taken out of his infant seat, so the back of his head was flat, and he couldn’t use his legs. They just sort of curled uselessly under him.

But that smile!

Since Jody was pregnant, and we were just two months away from being first time parents anyway...we thought, “why not give this taking-care-of-a-baby thing an early go?” We took him in, gave him some real estate in the crib we already had set up, and started pumping him full of baby food and formula. The first night we had him, he screamed all night until dawn, and when all opportunities for adult sleep were gone, he was out like a light.

We thought he would be with us for maybe a couple of days. Days turned into weeks. Julian’s home situation wasn’t getting any more promising; circumstances were difficult there. We faced some tough questions. Were we prepared to host him long term? How would that even work, practically or legally? Where would he end up if we didn’t keep caring for him? And maybe the most visceral question:

How in the world could we ever let this little guy go?

A few weeks in, we were getting really attached to the little guy, and he to us. We started getting to know his personality, and we were seeing some significant improvements in his health. He ate his body weight every day. He was gaining strength in his legs and ankles with the help of braces, though the doctor had said he may never walk. His favorite toy was this plastic fishbowl that would play music when you dropped the fish in it, and he would sway back and forth to the song. He, unlike most humans, loved when people blew in his face. And he had this contagious, gravelly, belly laugh that matched his enormous smile.

We loved this little guy. We wanted the best for him, and could no longer bear the thought of him in a situation where he might not have his most basic needs met. We decided to explore adoption—a decision that launched us on perhaps the most stressful, adventure of our marriage. Any adoption is difficult. An international adoption in Mexico at that time—that was darn near impossible. If I have my facts straight, we were one of two—total—international adoptions that took place in Mexico the year it happened.

So many things could sink us. If mom, who also thought the adoption was best for Julian, changed her mind and said “no,” or passed away (she was very sick at the time), it was over. If we couldn’t get a copy of his birth certificate, (which may or may not exist 10 hours away in a another state in some shady back room), it was over. If the government worker assigned to our case did not look favorably upon international adoption, it was over. One of the requirements we needed to meet was to have a home study done that would take 6 months to complete, which we did. Five and-a-half months in, the law changed. The type of home study we had done didn’t count anymore. We had to start over.

The process cost us dearly. For a year and a half, we signed papers, hemorrhaged money, drove all over Mexico, and prayed to God to let us make this little guy our son. We were like a bumblebee trying to buzz its way through the holes in a hundred spider webs. But we loved this guy too much to stop.

And then, joy. Relief. An American birth certificate with his name, and our names on it erased all question. He was ours.

Jody and I have been far from perfect parents for Juli. We’ve so often been impatient rather than empathetic when he struggles with math or remembering things. We’ve so many times dismissed ourselves from conversations with him that he finds interesting because we’re “busy” or tired.

But even with our shortcomings, I do think that the price we paid to make him ours—physically, financially, emotionally and otherwise—reveals something about us as parents. It reveals that we wanted him in our family. It reveals that we love him greatly.

And there was another Parent, a perfect parent with no shortcomings, who paid a much steeper price for his foreign adoption. *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.”* —John 3:16

God paid for our adoption with His son’s life. And faith in Jesus is the final signature needed to legalize it. When we receive Jesus as Lord and Savior by faith, His Spirit

writes His name on our birth certificate, so we are no longer children of the sin-soaked earth, but children of heaven.³

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." —Romans 8:15

The price our Father paid for our adoption—a forever covenant—reveals something about Him. It reveals that He loves us. It reveals He wants us in His family. It reveals that He is good.

How do you view God? Do you identify with some of the incomplete caricatures of God listed earlier?

I love this list compiled by Chad Norris⁴ of some of the Scriptural truths about our God, whom we get to now call Father. Let them soak in, and replace the broken images of God in your mind:

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Father is giving | Father is compassionate |
| Father is loving | Father is kind |
| Father is gentle | Father is forgiving |
| Father is inviting | Father is encouraging |
| Father is tender | Father is caring |
| Father is healer | Father is pleased |
| Father is happy | Father is abundant |
| Father is joyful | Father is complete |
| Father is stress-free | Father is warm |
| Father is friendly | Father is appealing |
| Father is fun | Father is empathizing |
| Father is present | Father is real |
| Father is gracious | Father is graceful |
| Father is light | |

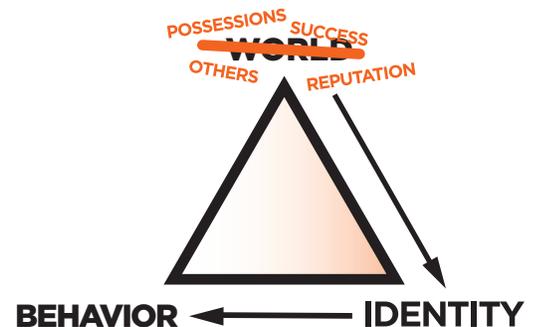
WHO AM I?

What we believe the answer is to this question drives everything we ever do. As Neil T. Anderson writes, "People may not always live what they profess, but they will always live what they believe."⁵

We will always act in accordance with what we believe about ourselves, whether true or not—which brings us to perhaps an even bigger question.

What—or who—defines who I am?

From what do I derive my identity?



³Colossians 1:13

⁴From his book *Signs, Wonders and a Baptist Preacher*, p. 187-188, copyright 2013, published by Chosen Books

⁵Anderson, Neil, *Victory Over the Darkness* p. 56, Bethany House Publishers

People in the world may find their identity in any number of things:

Success.

Status.

Our biological family.

Desires.

People we know.

Some of us are aware of things from which we derive our identity and significance. Some of us have not given it a second thought. Whichever the case is for us personally, before we know Jesus, we derive our identities from the incomplete pictures of reality provided for us by a fallen world. And on whichever points we agree with the world about who we are, those things will drive how we live.

God offers us something different.

When we receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior, God, the Father, adopts us, making us part of His family giving us a whole new identity as His children.

In Julian's case, once the adoption was finalized, a whole bunch of things instantly became true for him:

Jody and I were now his loving parents. Our family became his family.

His name became "Julian Isaac Massey." Isaac, of course, means, "he laughs."

Our home was now his home.

He now had access to our resources.

He now had an inheritance in our family.

He became a citizen of the United States.

In the same way, when we are adopted through faith in Jesus into God's family, a whole bunch of new things become true of us right away, because of the work of Jesus in His death and resurrection.

Try whispering these truths out loud as you read them:

I am a child of God.

—John 1:12

I am the light of the world.

—Matthew 5:14

I am now acceptable to God, completely forgiven, and at peace with Him.

—Romans 5:1

I have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light.

—Colossians 1:12-13

The Holy Spirit of God lives in me and empowers me.

—1 Corinthians 2:12

I am God's delight.

—Zephaniah 3:17

I am a new creation.

—1 Corinthians 5:17

I have an inheritance in God's kingdom.
—Galatians 4:6-7

I have been bought with Christ's blood and now belong to God.
—1 Corinthians 6:19-20

I am free from the punishment (condemnation) my sin deserves.
—Romans 8:1

I have been adopted by God and can call Him "Dad".
—Romans 8:15

I have been born again.
—1 John 5:18

I am an enemy of the devil.
—1 Peter 5:8

I can boldly approach God to ask for His help.
—Hebrews 4:16

I have access to everything I need for living a godly life.
—2 Peter 2:3

I am God's masterpiece, His handiwork. I am created in Christ to do His work.
—Ephesians 2:10

I am a citizen of heaven.
—Ephesians 2:19

I am chosen by God.
—1 Thessalonians 1:4

I am Christ's ambassador, His representative on earth.
—2 Corinthians 5:20

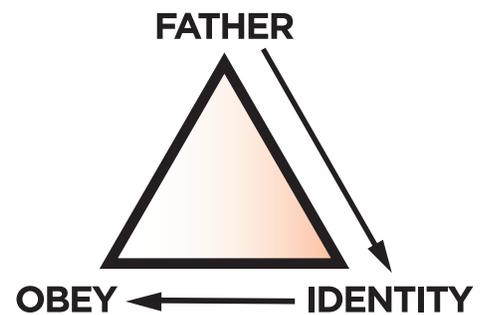
And these are just a few!

These things are true. They are not true because we earned them. They do not remain true because we maintain them. They are true because of what Jesus has done on our behalf.

And so, our Good Father has adopted us. He has given us a new identity, our truest identity. It is out of this new identity—this new reality, this new understanding of who we are—that we now get to live, in a new, life-fulfilling, God-honoring way.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
—Ephesians 2:8-10

This truth is illustrated at right, through one of my favorite tools: **The Covenant Triangle.**⁶



⁶From the book *Covenant and Kingdom* by Mike Breen

HOW WE NOW LIVE

Metamorphosis is a natural wonder. A caterpillar that can only crawl around slowly on its belly becomes this multicolored butterfly that flies through the air and lands on flowers. A slimy, squishy, helpless maggot transforms into a speedy, hairy little fly that buzzes around our food. I'm far less enamored with the second example...but still, it's a marvel.

Even though the wings are the most obvious reason a butterfly can now fly, there is something else, without which it will never get off the ground. The butterfly needs to know it is now a butterfly. It needs to know it has wings that work. Somehow it seems that these creatures are hardwired with this knowledge.

But what if the butterfly thinks it's still a caterpillar? Without the belief it's no longer a caterpillar, it would never fly. Right? Why would it ever try to fly? It only believes it can crawl.

Now, I have no idea whether or not it is possible to convince a butterfly it's still a caterpillar. Some genius in a lab will probably someday figure it out.

But from this simple analogy, do you see how important it is that we believe the truth about the kind of Father God is? And who we now are as a result?

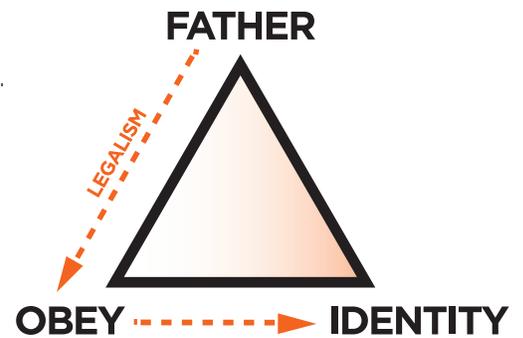
See, although the caterpillar may not so easily be fooled, we can be. Satan is called the "father of lies." It is one of his most powerful tactics against us. "We are the light of the world..." but if we can be convinced otherwise, we won't act like it. Lies can enslave us.

Our behavior always follows what we really believe. What if I believe in some version of God as the "workaholic boss," or the "punitive school principal?" Maybe my own dad was that way, so that's become the lens through which I view life. If I believe in that version of God, I'll believe it's my behavior, how I perform, that makes me right with God, rather than believing God is already pleased with me because of the work of Jesus on my behalf.

That's not grace. That's *legalism*: The belief that the way to significance, or getting right with God, is by following the rules and doing good works. It is the playground of should and shame.

It's like running *backwards* through the triangle.

Because we believe our identity isn't settled, we keep working to settle it.



But Julian isn't my son because he is working hard enough at it. He is my son because I signed the papers. It is done.

And I don't love him only when he behaves. I love him because he is my son. And because he knows he is, he acts like it.

Or what if we let Hollywood's voice drown out the voice of our Father in our lives, and we become convinced that

because we don't have a certain body type we are ugly, undesirable and worthless?

Even though God says we are His masterpiece, His delight, and worth giving His Son's life for, we will live in insecurity, ever anxious to catch glances that confirm our fears.

From where are you most often tempted to derive your identity, other than God?

Most often, when our behavior (our obedience to God) is off, we address the behavior.

"Quit getting drunk."

"I need to pray more."

"Quit looking at pornography."

"I should want to spend more time with my kids."

Are these behavioral changes positive? Sure! But in reality, the behavior is a symptom of belief. If we have an obedience problem, we have an identity problem. There's a God-truth we've not yet fully grasped or believed that's driving that behavior.

We need to replace the old audio files playing in our minds with new ones. We need to renew our minds.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. —Romans 12:2

Now in covenant relationship with God through Jesus, a new truth informs and governs our lives. We need to let His truth soak through our minds and hearts, washing away the brokenness of the sin-stained reality.

It is through abiding with our Father in the Scriptures regularly that we renew our minds, and God the Holy Spirit, who lives in us, works to convince our spirits of the new reality. He empowers us to live in it.

We grow to understand who our Father is.

We grow to understand who we are.

We grow to understand all that we have access to, as He says to us, "child, all I have is yours." And we in turn say the same.

When we know who our God is and who we are, obedience is not a "have to." It's a "get to." It's a joy, as we say, "Father, you have loved me so much. My obedience says I love you back."⁷