

Naming God

Study #:

Deck: *How should we address God?*

Study Intro:

A *thing's* name defines it and clarifies what we think of and helps us talk about it. But a *person's* is much more than mere definition: it reveals identity, character, and relationship. To many, God is just another concept with a label: Deity, Creator, Judge. But to the believer, he is the single most important person one can know. And we want to know — we need to know — what is his name?

How has God introduced himself to us, and what does this reveal about his identity? What do God's names reveal about his character and the way he has acted throughout history? And how does our use of God's names help us relate to him?

This study assumes God is more than a concept or a construct, and searches for the answer: How should we address God?

Scripture References:

Genesis 2; Genesis 3; Mathew 6:5-15; Hebrews 2:18, Hebrews 4:16, 1 John 2:1

Based on:

"Naming God," by Virginia Stem Owens, BOOKS & CULTURE magazine, January/February 2007, Vol. 13, No. 1, Page 8 (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/001/1.8.html>).

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide for each person the article "Naming God," included at the end of this study.

When we first meet someone we tend to want key facts right away: "What do you do? Where are you from? What is your name?" Without at least having someone's name, building a relationship is difficult — if not impossible.

If the Westminster Shorter Catechism is right, our main purpose in life is to "to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." But glorifying and enjoying God assumes an intimacy far beyond mere job titles and last-known-addresses. We need to know who God is so we can relate — talk to him, glorify him, and enjoy his company.

Even though God has revealed himself, and told us who he is, sometimes we still get his name wrong. Forgetting that the names we use reveal the nature of a relationship we often think of God solely in terms of his titles and "job descriptions." Katie Wiebe recalls what J.B. Phillips had to say about reducing God to labels:

In the classic *Your God is Too Small*, J.B. Phillips says we tend to give God many names which aren't actually his names: managing director, puppeteer, magician, resident policeman, fun-hater, pie-in-the sky, and others.

Today we have added "health and wealth bringer" and others.

— Katie Wiebe in the *Christian Leader* (Dec.6, 1989).
CHRISTIANITY TODAY, Vol. 34, no. 9

Discussion starters (3-5 questions):

[Q] Which is more important, that we call on God at all, or that we use the right name? Does it matter what people call *you*? Why?

[Q] How have you addressed God in your thoughts and prayers? How have your ways of addressing God changed throughout the years? What caused the change?

[Q] Have you ever noticed your (or others') prayers using the "scatter-gun" approach in naming God? These prayers often begin with something like, "Dear Father-God, Lord Jesus ..." or something similar. Why do you think we sometimes adopt this approach?

[Q] We smile at children who struggle to understand God — but how is our concept of God superior or inferior to a child's approach?

Madeleine L'Engle has written, "It seems that more than ever the compulsion today is to identify, to reduce someone to what is on the label. To identify is to control, to limit. To love is to call by name, and so open the wide gates of creativity. But we forget names, and turn to labels ... If we are pigeon-holed and labeled we are un-named" ("Walking on Water," CHRISTIANITY TODAY, Vol. 39, no. 2).

[Q] Think back over your recent prayer- and thought-life. In what ways have you reverted to thinking about God in terms of labels and titles instead of the names he has revealed to us? Why do you think someone might start address of God in these terms, and what effect does it have on our relationship with him?

[Q] How does a study of God's names help us remain intimate with God? What does understanding God's names reveal about who he is, his character, his nature, and his relationship with us?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Names are crucial for true intimacy

Read Genesis Chapter 2 (the creation of Adam and Eve) and/or Exodus chapter 3 (God's call to Moses).

Communicating with God —prayer — is the single most intimate act one can ever participate in. It is a willing baring of the soul, a voluntary nakedness before God. In prayer we bring to him our needs, desires, wants, and even our apathy, and we lay it all down. Often clumsily, sometimes hastily. Sometimes even thoughtlessly — especially when we lose sight of who God really is.

Perhaps one prescription to remedy thoughtless prayer is to take seriously the various names God has revealed to us, and to intentionally use them in our prayer to remind ourselves that this is how God wants us to know him.

Western cultures do not traditionally attach as much significance or meaning to a person's name as the ancient near East people did. In the ancient near East, to name an unnamed thing was to validate its existence — and we are driven to put names to things we do not understand if only to try to grasp them.

[Q] Consider the the creation account of Genesis two. How did God choose the name for the first man? What, if anything, does this name signify about the nature of the one named, and his relationship to his creator?

Leader's Note: *see the footnote in the NIV for Genesis 2:7: "The Hebrew for man (adam) sounds like and may be related to the Hebrew for ground (adamah it is also the name Adam (see Gen. 2:20)."*

[Q] After creating man, what was the first task God gave Adam? Why do you think it was important for Adam to name all the living creatures instead of God? How does naming a thing define its relationship to the one doing the naming?

[Q] If name reveal character and identity, how important is it that we learn and properly use God's names as he has revealed them to us? What is the danger of using our own titles and names for God instead of his?

[Q] While naming the un-named is part of how we create identity and understand the world, what happens when you encounter someone who already *has* a name? How do the names we use for people reflect the nature of our relationship to them?

[Q] What happens when you call someone a name that is inaccurate or derogatory — even if unintentional?

[Q] And what happens when you meet the supreme authority of all creation? Would it be satisfactory to *invent* a name for the one who named you?

Names go beyond validating existence, names also reveal the identity, character, and nature of the one who bears the name. Moses understood this in Exodus when God appointed him to return to Egypt. Moses asked of God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

God’s answer, for all its simplicity, is the bedrock for every name he has ever revealed to us:

“I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ... Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.”

[Q] In this first recorded instance of God revealing his name to man, what does God want us to know about himself? What is the foundation of all of God’s revealed names?

Leader’s Note: *The first thing God wants us to know about his name is that he is who he says he is. He is not who we say he is. He is not what anybody else says he is. He alone has the right to identify himself. He alone has the right to name himself.*

[Q] What are some things you can do to become more aware of the names God has revealed to us?

[Q] What is your favorite mode of address for God? Why does this name resonate with you more than other names?

[Q] How do the names you use for God change the way you pray or change the content of your prayers? Conversely, how does the content of your prayer effect the name you chose when addressing God?

Optional Activity:

Using a whiteboard or large poster-board, have your group call out as many of the names and titles of God from the Bible that they can remember (or find). Afterward, play the song, “He Is,” by Aaron Jeffrey, which highlights titles and ways that God has related to his people from each book of the Bible. This could spark discussion about which names best fit with the different parts of the song, which names people had forgotten about, which names had the most emotional appeal, or which names people might want to try to remember to use more often. Pay special attention to the end of the song.

Teaching point two: God wants us to call him Father

Read Mathew 6:5-15 (The Lord’s Prayer)

Virginia Stem Owens relates how that when she goes to pray, she sometimes struggles over which name of God to use in her prayers. She recognizes that recognizing God’s sovereignty and lordship requires an attitude of subservience and even slavery. On the other hand, calling God Father or even “Abba” — like calling him “Daddy” — highlights her relationship to God as a daughter to her father. Neither approach, of course, is wrong, but she sometimes struggles over which approach is right for the right moment. And she struggles over which attitude is right for her approach to God in prayer.

Jesus’ disciples also needed some guidance about prayer. They needed to know how to pray, how not to pray, and what to pray for. In Mathew chapter 6, Jesus provides several guidelines for prayer, fasting, benevolence, and attitudes — perhaps the most well-known is “The Lord’s Prayer.”

[Q] When Jesus opened his prayer with the name, “Our Father in heaven,” what is he signifying? Do you think Jesus’ and his disciples’ understanding of fatherhood is different than the American view? How do they differ?

[Q] When Jesus instructed us to pray, “hallowed be your name,” what attitude is he guiding us toward. Why do you think Jesus thought it was important to follow “Father in heaven” with “hallowed be your name?”

[Q] What does it mean for a name to be hallowed — or holy? What makes things that are holy different from things that are not, and how does this effect how we “handle” them?

[Q] When God revealed himself to Moses, he told him that one of his names was “The LORD, the God of your fathers,” but in this prayer, Jesus reveals God’s name as “our Father.” What do you think is different between the two Bible contexts, if anything? And how do the differences between Moses’ situation and the disciples’ situation impact the name revealed for God?

[Q] Dads have an awesome — if not terrible — responsibility to their children, for the role they play and the example they set molds how children see God as Father. How has your view of your father influenced your view of God as Father? In what way has your relationship with your father helped or hindered the way you approach God?

[Q] If you are a parent, how have the challenges and joys of parenthood changed the way you view God as Father?

Optional Activity:

Pass out cardboard name tags and pencils and ask each participant to choose a new name for themselves in the style of “Dances with Wolves.” Ask them to carefully pick a name that truly describes them, and that they would be happy to be stuck with. (For example, the poet in the group might like to be called “Paints with Words.”). Each person should then be given an opportunity to explain why they picked this name for themselves. Then, have everybody switch name tags with somebody else and wear their new name tag while the group breaks for refreshments. During the break, everyone should make a special effort to call others by the name on their new name tag.

Once you get back together, discuss how it felt to be addressed by a name that didn’t “fit.” How would it feel to be stuck with the wrong name forever? Then discuss how using the proper name for each individual not only honors that individual, but also honors the name.

Teaching point three: We should call on Jesus’ name

Read Hebrews 2:18, Hebrews 4:16, 1 John 2:1.

Where there are many *titles* that can apply to God (Creator, Master, Lord, Almighty), other religions can co-opt those same titles and apply them to their own concept of deity. As Owens notes, the Muslim name for God, *Allah*, is derived from the same words as the Jewish *Eloah* and the Aramaic *Alah*. But the similarities between the Christian God and the Muslim God fall apart soon thereafter.

Christianity, unlike other religions, is based first on a personal relationship with God, not merely a set of moral doctrines and theological theories. Salvation comes through Jesus, and no other name (Acts 4:12).

This is one name, higher and more personal than any other, that points conclusively to one member of the Godhead, who cannot be mistaken as a mere concept, construct, or idea. This is the same Jesus who walked among us and shared our temptations (Matthew 4:1, Hebrews 2:18), who told his disciples, “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” (John 14:14), and who continues to intercede on our behalf today (Hebrews 2:18, Hebrews 4:16, 1 John 2:1).

Jeannette Glasscock described her prayers, saying that while she usually prays to the Father, in times of great need, she instinctively calls out for Jesus’ help and intercession. She writes:

When I pray, I address God as Father, in Jesus Name.

But, when I’m in a hurry, I just call out for Jesus to help!

For example, while driving a car full of kids in a rain storm one night we began sliding off the road into a river and I shouted: "Jesus! Help!" And the car stopped right on the bank! There is no way that car would have stopped by itself. It was sliding!

— Don and Jeannette Glasscock,
via personal e-mail correspondence (January 30, 2007)

[Q] How do you call out to God when you are in dire straits, and why do you make that particular choice? Do you call on Jesus, as the Glasscocks do in the illustration above, or do you call on the Father, or do you call him something else? Why?

[Q] What difference, if any, does it make whether you pray to Jesus, to the Father, or to the Holy Spirit? If it's okay to pray to Jesus, why or why not also pray to the Holy Spirit?

Leader's Note: *While the Bible neither records any prayers directed to the Holy Spirit, nor does it command us to, the Holy Spirit is nevertheless God, just as Jesus is God and the Father is God. Praying to God — any member of the Godhead — is perfectly natural. Since believers are called into fellowship (relationship) with the Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14), and the Spirit is already present when we pray, helping us and interceding for us (Romans 8:26), Praying to the Holy Spirit would certainly not be wrong. Yet the Scriptures probably don't show Jesus or the disciples praying to the Holy Spirit probably because one of his primary activities is to bear witness of Jesus, not to bear witness of himself (John 15:26).*

[Q] God has revealed another of his personal names to us, and that is *Yahweh*, sometimes translated as *Jehovah*. Do you ever pray to God using this name? Why, or why not? What difference is there between praying to *Yahweh* versus praying to Jesus?

[Q] Some Christian groups and cults (notably, the Jehovah's Witnesses) discourage praying to Jesus, principally on the grounds that Jesus himself only prayed to the Father. What do you think about such doctrines? What Biblical evidence can you find to support praying to Jesus?

Leader's Note: *Consider the following passages, note that the Greek term *Kyrios* is traditionally considered to be a title of Jesus, and is usually translated "Lord," as shown below:*

"You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." (John 14:14)

"with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours..." (1 Corinthians 1:2)

"Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord." (Ephesians 5:19)

"Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart." (Acts 8:22)

"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service." (1 Timothy 1:12)

"Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." (Hebrews 2:18)

"My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." (1 John 2:1)

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

"Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25)

"Come, Lord Jesus." (Revelation 22:20)

"Come, O Lord!" (1 Corinthians 16:22)

Optional Activity:

As a group, close with a hymn or worship song directed to Jesus. You don't have to sing it, you could hand out printed copies of the song and read it in unison as a closing prayer.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Prayer is ultimately about communicating with God, your creator and heavenly Father who named you before you were born. For too many people, prayer has become routine and formal, perhaps even dry and emotionally flat. Virginia Stem Owens seeks to go beyond mere routine, the kind of prayer that talks *at* God and instead talks *with* God.

God wants us to have a vital, dynamic relationship with him, but his infinite character and nature cannot be captured with one name and one way of relating to him. He is what he is. And he is at once both Master and Servant, God the Father and Jesus the Son, Liberator and Judge, Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End.

In all of his ways, and by all of his names, let us truly get to know, the great "I am."










Action Point:


Jesus stressed that we are to have a childlike attitude in our faith. Try going deeper with God as your heavenly Father by addressing him as Daddy, Papa, or Abba for the next week or two. Jesus did it, and St. Paul encouraged it (Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6). See how this change of address influences your relationship with God and the way you pray.


— Study prepared by Rich Tatum,
freelance writer, preacher, and blogger
at <http://tatumweb.com/blog/>

Additional Resources

This should include 5-8 related books or websites. To find these look at ChristianBooks.com and put in this format:

-  *Aaron Jeoffrey*, by Aaron and Jeoffrey Benward (Starsong/Emd, 1995; ASIN B000005KUK)
-  *Names of God*, by Nathan Stone (Moody Publishers; New Ed edition: 1944; ISBN 0802458548)
-  *Praying the Names of God: A Daily Guide*, by Ann Spangler (Zondervan, 2004; ISBN 0310253535)
-  *Names of God, The*, by Ken Hemphill (B&H Publishing Group, 2001; ISBN 0805424369)
-  *Lord, I Want to Know You: A Devotional Study on the Names of God*, by Kay Arthur (WaterBrook Press, 2000; ISBN 1578564395)
-  *Names of God, The*, by Andrew Juke (Kregel Classics, 1967; ISBN 0825429587)
-  *Knowing God by Name: Names of God That Bring Hope and Healing*, by David R. Wilkerson (Chosen, 2003; ISBN 0800793420)
-  *All the Divine Names and Titles in the Bible*, by Dr. Herbert Lockyer (Zondervan, 1988; ISBN 0310280419)
-  *Every Name Of God In The Bible*, by Larry Richards (Nelson Reference; Illustrate edition, 2001; ISBN 0785207023)

 *God's Name God's Nature*, by Jill Briscoe (Chariot Victor Publishing, 1988; ISBN 0896935841)

 *Names of God, The*, by Lambert Dolphin (Accessed: 01/25/2007, <<http://www.ldolphin.org/Names.html>>)