

Session Three

Grace and the Covenant Family

Abide

The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that family language is one of the New Testament's pervasive and indispensable registers for salvation, and that it is not decoration on a legal transaction but the thing itself.

Catholic Touchstone. God does not merely acquit us. He adopts us. Everything in the next three sessions depends on whether that adoption is a legal fiction or a real change, and Scripture says it is real.

This is the framework session. Do not let it feel like a detour before the real argument about justification. It is the reason the argument comes out where it does.

What You Need to Know

Ask a room of Christians how a person is saved and you will get courtroom vocabulary: guilt, verdict, acquittal, a debt paid. All of that is genuinely in Scripture and none of it should be surrendered. But it is not the only register, and it is not the controlling one. Again and again the New Testament reaches for a household.

God sends his Son so that we might receive adoption as sons, and because we are sons he sends the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying Abba (Galatians 4:4-7). Those led by the Spirit are sons, and if children then heirs, fellow heirs with Christ (Romans 8:14-17). To all who received him he gave power to become children of God, born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh but of God (John 1:12-13). See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and then St. John adds three words that decide this whole book: and so we are (1 John 3:1).

That last phrase is the hinge. St. John is not content to say we are treated as children or reckoned as children. He says we are called children, and then insists on the reality.

Why the register matters

If salvation is essentially a verdict, then what happens inside a person afterward is a consequence of salvation but not part of it, and the whole Catholic apparatus of sacraments, growth, and cooperation looks like an intrusion. If salvation is essentially adoption into a family, then transformation is not an add-on; it is what being adopted means. A child who is legally adopted but never brought into the house has not received much.

Both pictures are scriptural and Catholics should hold both. The Church teaches that justification is not only the remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man (CCC 1989). Not instead of. Also.

Honest ground on the ecumenical question

In 1999 the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification stating a shared understanding of justification by grace through faith, and declaring that the mutual condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to the teaching presented in that document. Represent it accurately in both directions. It is a real convergence and dismissing it is dishonest. It also did not resolve every difference, and treating it as though the argument is over is equally dishonest. Say both.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The covenant formula recurs across the whole Bible in a family of closely related wordings, and in every one of them it is kinship language rather than contract language.

“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.” **Genesis 17:7**

It returns at Exodus 6:7, Jeremiah 31:33, and Ezekiel 36:28, and it lands at Revelation 21:3. Israel is called God’s firstborn son at Exodus 4:22, and the Davidic king is promised a father in 2 Samuel 7:14. A contract binds parties who remain separate. A covenant of this kind makes kin.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Athanasius

On the Incarnation, ch. 54 (summary)

Athanasius states the exchange at the heart of the Incarnation: the Word became man so that we might be made god, that is, so that we might share by grace in what belongs to him by nature.

Handle the famous formulation carefully. The Church does not teach that we become God in essence. She teaches that we are made partakers of the divine nature, which is 2 Peter 1:4, and the Fathers use deliberately strong language for it.

Summary of the formula at On the Incarnation, ch. 54; the wording here is a paraphrase and not a quotation, and adoptive sonship is the Church’s way of unpacking what the strong language means.

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

Letter 194, to Sixtus (summary)

Augustine teaches, in substance, that when God rewards our merits he is crowning his own gifts, because whatever good we do is itself the effect of grace working in us.

This one sentence heads off half the arguments in Sessions Four and Five. Catholics do not hold that we contribute something independent of grace. We hold that grace produces something real in us that God then honours.

Voice of the Church

St. Leo the Great

On the dignity of the Christian, quoted at CCC 1691 (summary)

Leo urges Christians to recognise their dignity, since having been made sharers in the divine nature they should not return by base conduct to their former condition.

The pastoral shape is worth noticing. His argument for holiness is not fear of losing a verdict but

consistency with an identity already given.

Summary of Leo's Christmas sermon on Christian dignity; the same passage is quoted in CCC 1691. Sermon number withheld because editions number the Nativity sermons differently.

Catechism Connection

- CCC 1996-2005 on grace: the free and undeserved help God gives, and sanctifying grace as a habitual gift that perfects the soul.
- CCC 1989 states that justification is not only the remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.
- CCC 1265-1266 on what baptism confers, including sanctifying grace and the theological virtues.
- CCC 460 on partaking in the divine nature, quoting 2 Peter 1:4 and the Fathers.

Thread Watch

Leader only.

- THREAD A, the Abiding Question. Tonight supplies the reason abiding is possible at all: a real relationship has been created. Do not name it.
- THREAD B, the Sealed Guess. Two sessions to go. Some participants will feel tonight that they answered badly. Say nothing.
- THREAD C, Received and Delivered. Sonship is received. Point at it wherever it surfaces.

Session Goals

- 1. Every participant can name four family words the New Testament uses for salvation.
- 2. Every participant can explain why 1 John 3:1 resists a purely legal reading.
- 3. The group discovers the covenant formula recurring from Genesis to Revelation.
- 4. Every participant can state that Catholics affirm both the legal and the familial registers.
- 5. Nobody leaves thinking Catholics believe we contribute something independent of grace.

Timed Plan

- Opening prayer and Win: 12 minutes.
- The Galatians and Romans work, questions 3 and 4: 22 minutes.
- The covenant formula discovery, question 5: 20 minutes.
- The steelman and question 6: 22 minutes.
- Send, Live It, closing prayer: 12 minutes.

If you are running short: cut the Joint Declaration material, which is leader background. Do not cut the covenant discovery; Session Four depends on it.

THE OBJECTION BENCH

Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.

"This is sentimental. Paul's language is legal."

Handled in the steelman. Concede the forensic vocabulary immediately when it arrives.

"If we are already sons, why do anything?"

Because that is what being a son is. Ask the room whether a child stops acting like a member of the family once adopted. The obligation flows from the identity rather than earning it.

Romans 8:17 supplies the sober version: fellow heirs, provided we suffer with him. Paul puts the condition in the same sentence as the inheritance.

"Partakers of the divine nature sounds like the Mormons."

A fair worry and worth answering carefully. The Church does not teach that we become gods by nature or that God was once as we are.

The phrase is 2 Peter 1:4 and the tradition means participation in God's life by grace, not identity of essence. The distinction is between sharing in a fire's heat and being the fire.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, you did not settle for pardoning us. You made us yours. Give us tonight some sense of what that actually means, and keep us from being small about it. Amen.

Win

1. What is the difference between being forgiven by someone and being taken back in?
2. When you were praying this week, what did you call God?

Build

Read aloud: Galatians 4:4-7, then Romans 8:14-17.

3. List every family word in those two passages.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Son, born of woman, adoption, sons, Spirit of his Son, Abba Father, no longer a slave but a son, heir, children, fellow heirs.

Ask what is conspicuously absent: there is no courtroom in either passage. The verdict language is elsewhere in Romans and it is real, but it is not what Paul reaches for here.

4. Read 1 John 3:1-2. What does John add after saying we should be called children of God?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

And so we are. Three words, and they are the reason this session exists.

John could have stopped at the title. He refuses to let it be only a title. Whatever else is true, the sonship is not a courtesy.

Live discovery. Give five people one verse each and have them read in order: Genesis 17:7, Exodus 6:7, Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 36:28, Revelation 21:3. Ask the room what they are hearing.

5. What is the pattern, and what kind of relationship is it describing?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The same covenant promise, in wordings that vary but keep one shape, from Abraham to the last page of the Bible: I will be your God and you shall be my people. Genesis 17:7 gives the first half of it, Exodus, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel give both halves, and Revelation 21:3 announces the fulfilment as God dwelling with his people.

It is kinship, not commerce. A contract leaves the parties who they were. This makes a household.

If the group is quick, add Exodus 4:22, where Israel is called God's firstborn son, and 2 Samuel 7:14, where the king is promised a father.

DIG DEEPER: The word Abba

Paul keeps the Aramaic word in Greek letters twice, in Galatians 4:6 and Romans 8:15, which is unusual

enough to be deliberate.

Whatever precise register it carries, it is a word from inside the household rather than from the court, and Paul thought it was worth preserving untranslated.

The Steelman

THE DEPTH Read in full.

The strongest form of the objection.

The family language is real and beautiful and it is not the mechanism. When Paul explains how a sinner comes to stand before God, in Romans 3 and 4, he does not use a household. He uses a court. He speaks of being justified, a verdict word. He speaks of righteousness reckoned or credited, an accounting word. He quotes David on the man to whom the Lord does not reckon sin.

And the claim is not that nothing real happens inside a Christian. Regeneration, adoption, and sanctification are real gifts, and every serious Protestant confession says so. The claim is narrower and harder to answer: justification itself is a definitive verdict, received by faith, complete the moment it is spoken, and the renewal that comes with it is a distinct gift rather than a part of the verdict. Making the family language primary quietly relocates salvation from something declared about us to something happening inside us, and once it is inside us it can be measured, doubted, and lost. Which is exactly the anxiety Catholicism produces and the Gospel was meant to end.

6. What is right about that, and does Paul actually separate the two?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Right, and concede it plainly: the vocabulary of Romans 3 and 4 is genuinely forensic, and any Catholic who tries to talk that away is mishandling Paul. We are not trading the courtroom for the household.

But look at what Paul does next. Romans 8 opens with the verdict, no condemnation, and then moves within a few verses to the Spirit, sonship, Abba, and inheritance, as one continuous argument. He does not treat them as two departments. The verdict opens the door of the house and the Spirit brings you in. A careful Protestant will answer that these are distinct gifts given at the same moment rather than one gift, and that reply is fair. So the real question is not whether they arrive together but what justification itself is, and that is where CCC 1989 and Session Four take the argument.

And 1 John 3:1 will not let the sonship be a title only. And so we are. That phrase does not by itself settle how justification works, since a declaration can confer a real status; what it settles is that the filial status is real and not a courtesy. The Catholic claim that justification includes interior renewal rests on the wider scriptural case and is stated outright in the Catechism.

The Catholic position is not that transformation replaces the verdict but that justification includes both. CCC 1989 says it directly: not only the remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.

Take the last part of the objection seriously rather than brushing it aside. Anxiety is a real pastoral danger and some Catholics do live in it, sometimes from thin catechesis, sometimes from temperament, scrupulosity, or wounds that have nothing to do with doctrine. What the Church actually teaches is hope: confidence in God's mercy and in the grace of final perseverance, and a filial fear that dreads grieving a Father rather than a servile fear that dreads a sentence. Corrosive anxiety is not that teaching, and despair, which the Church does name as a sin against hope, is a different thing from

anxiety and should never be laid on a frightened person as an accusation. Session Seven takes this up properly.

Send

7. Do you relate to God more as a judge or as a father? Answer honestly.
8. If you took the word heir seriously this week, what would change?

Live It This Week

- Pray the Our Father slowly once a day, stopping after the first two words.
- Read Romans 8 in one sitting and mark every family word.
- Do one thing this week that a member of the household would do and a defendant would not.
- Keep praying for your person by name.

Closing Prayer

Father, you could have pardoned us and left it there. You did not. Thank you for the Spirit who teaches us to call you what you are. Make us at home in your house. Amen.

Memory Verse

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."

1 John 3:1

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

- Genesis 17:7; Exodus 6:7; Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:28; Revelation 21:3, the covenant formula (live discovery)
- Exodus 4:22, Israel my firstborn son
- 2 Samuel 7:14, I will be his father
- Galatians 4:4-7, adoption and Abba (core text)
- Romans 8:14-17, sons, heirs, fellow heirs
- John 1:12-13, power to become children of God
- 1 John 3:1-2, and so we are (memory verse)
- 2 Peter 1:4, partakers of the divine nature
- Titus 3:5-7, the washing of regeneration
- Romans 3:20-28 and 4:1-8, the forensic vocabulary (steelman)

Catechism: CCC 460, 1265-1266, 1989, 1996-2005.

Patristic: St. Athanasius, On the Incarnation. St. Augustine, Letter 194, to Sixtus. St. Leo the Great, on Christian dignity, quoted at CCC 1691.