

SESSION FIVE

Children of God

1 John 2:28-3:10

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: Participants discover that divine filiation is not a metaphor: "that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (3:1). They trace the two families and two seeds back to Eden, feel the weight of the promised likeness ("we shall see him as he is"), and wrestle honestly with John's hardest sentence: "no one born of God commits sin."

Catholic Touchstone: Divine filiation and baptismal regeneration. In baptism we are truly begotten of God, made partakers of the divine nature, not merely declared adopted on paper (CCC 1265-1266): the boldest claim Christianity makes about ordinary people.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The hinge verse is 3:1, and it deserves to be read like the thunderclap it is: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are." The last clause is the doctrine: *and so we are*. John will not let filiation be an honorary title or a legal fiction. The word he uses throughout is *tekna*, children, etymologically "born ones" from *tiktō*, to bear; John reserves *huios*, Son, for Jesus alone, precisely to protect both truths: only one is Son by nature, yet we are truly begotten, *gennaō*, born of God (2:29; 3:9), sharing his own life. This is what the Catholic tradition calls divine filiation, and the Eastern Fathers called *theosis*: not that we become God by nature, but that God's own life is really communicated to us in baptism (CCC 1265-1266).

Verse 2 gives the trajectory: "we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." Already and not yet, in one sentence: the birth is real now, the likeness is coming, and the mechanism of the final transformation is vision itself, seeing him as he is. The Church calls this the beatific vision, and verse 3 draws the moral consequence: "every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." Hope is not a mood; it is a purifying engine.

Then the passage divides the world into two families: children of God and children of the devil (3:10), doing right versus committing sin, born of God versus "of the devil" who "has sinned from the beginning" (3:8). This is not Manichean dualism, two equal gods, but two paternities, and John's

language reaches all the way back to Eden: two seeds at war since Genesis 3:15, tonight's live discovery. Guard it until Build 5.

Now the hard sentence, and do not soften it before the group has felt it: "No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God" (3:9; the RSV2CE's "God's nature" renders the Greek *sperma*, his seed). Set it beside 1:8 from the same pen: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." John appears to contradict himself within two chapters. The classic resolutions, offered honestly: many interpreters and translations (e.g., "keeps on sinning") take the present tense as pointing to sin as a settled practice, a way of life rather than any single act; the tense alone does not prove this, but the reading is strongly supported by the letter's own logic, since the same author commands confession (1:9) and provides an Advocate "if any one does sin" (2:1); and the logic of the verse is about origin, not biography: insofar as the divine seed abides and we abide, sin simply cannot come from that source; when we sin, we are acting from somewhere other than our birth. John is drawing family portraits, not issuing a perfection guarantee, and the man who wrote 2:1 ("if any one does sin, we have an advocate") has already told us what to do when the portrait and the mirror disagree.

Watch the steelman at Build 6: some readers take 3:9 as proof that the truly regenerate are incapable of serious sin, so that anyone who sins gravely was never really born again. Honor the reading's seriousness about regeneration before pressing it with 1:8-2:1, with the letter's own imperatives to abide, and with the pastoral wreckage the reading produces. Name it precisely for yourself: this is a perfectionist or hardline perseverance reading; most careful Reformed interpreters read 3:9 in the same habitual sense this guide does, and the genuine Catholic difference lies elsewhere: whether one truly born of God can gravely fall and be restored, which the Church affirms in mortal sin, repentance, and the sacrament of Reconciliation.

Pastoral note: verse 1 ends with a consolation your group needs: "the reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him." Young adults feel the world's incomprehension of serious faith keenly. John names it as a family resemblance, not a failure.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Genesis 3:15. The first gospel: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed." Two seeds at war from Eden forward: John's two families in 3:8-10 are this verse grown up, and the devil who "has sinned from the beginning" is the same serpent. Tonight's summit live discovery; reveal nothing early.

Exodus 4:22 and Hosea 1:10. "Israel is my first-born son," and the promise that in the place called Not-my-people they shall be called "Sons of the living God." Filiation is the covenant's oldest dream; John announces it has come true at the level of birth, not just title.

Genesis 1:26-27. Made in the image and likeness: what Eden gave and sin defaced, 3:2 promises restored and surpassed, "we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." The likeness lost by grasping is regained by beholding.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Athanasius *On the Incarnation, 54*

Athanasius compresses the whole doctrine into one fearless sentence: the Son of God became man so that we might become god. He does not mean we acquire the divine nature as our own; he means the Incarnation's purpose is our real participation in God's life, exactly the begetting John announces. The Fathers did not flinch from 3:1, and neither should we.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Leo the Great *Sermon 21, On the Nativity*

Leo's Christmas charge is the pastoral edge of tonight's text: Christian, remember your dignity, and now that you share in God's own nature, do not return to your former base condition by sinning. Remember whose head and whose body you are a member of. For Leo, moral life is memory: sin is forgetting whose child you have become.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Irenaeus of Lyons *Against Heresies, Book V, Preface*

Irenaeus states the exchange at the heart of the Gospel: the Word of God, out of his boundless love, became what we are in order to bring us to be what he himself is. The two-family battle John describes is, for Irenaeus, the long war begun in Eden, and the divine begetting is its turning point: the serpent's seed is defeated by making the woman's seed our brother.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1265-1266 teaches that baptism does what John says birth does: makes the neophyte a new creature, an adopted son of God, a partaker of the divine nature, member of Christ, with sanctifying grace infused, not merely imputed.

CCC 460 gathers the Fathers, Athanasius included, on the wondrous exchange: the Son of God became man so that men might become sons of God, sharers in his divinity.

CCC 2782-2784 unpacks what praying "Our Father" presumes: a real begetting, a family resemblance under construction, and the obligation to live as children of such a Father.

THREAD WATCH

The God Is thread: hold the seal. "God is love" is three sessions away, and tonight's talk of the Father's love (3:1) will tempt guessers to fish. Confirm nothing; enjoy everything.

The Knowing thread advances quietly. "We know that when he appears we shall be like him" (3:2), "by this we know" rhythms continue. Keep underlining; 5:13 stays guarded until Session Ten.

The two-families motif planted tonight returns next session in the person of Cain (3:12), where the abstract seed-war gets a face and a murder weapon. Do not preview Cain; let Genesis 3:15 stand alone tonight and let next week's text name the first child of the evil one.

SESSION GOALS

1.

Land 3:1 with its full weight: called children of God, *and so we are*, real begetting, not legal fiction.

2.

Trace the already/not-yet of 3:2-3 and connect hope to purification.

3.

Discover Genesis 3:15 live: two seeds at war from Eden, resolved into John's two families.

4.

Wrestle 3:9 against 1:8 honestly, steelman the perfectionist and never-really-saved readings, and resolve with the habitual sense and the logic of origin.

TIME NOTE

75 to 90 minutes. If time runs short, compress Build 2 and cut Build 8. Protect Build 5, the Genesis discovery, and Build 6, the 3:9 wrestle; the session stands on those two.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer:

Father, you did not hire us, adopt us on paper, or take us in as boarders. You begot us: your own life, in us, by water and the Spirit. Tonight, let the words be true in our hearing: children of God, and so we are. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

1.

What is one trait, a gesture, a temper, a laugh, that people say you got from your mother or father? How do you feel about carrying it?

2.

What is the difference between being told you belong somewhere and actually feeling you were born into it?

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

1.

Read 1 John 3:1 aloud twice, and the second time, stop hard after the fifth-to-last word: "that we should be called children of God; *and so we are*." Why does John add that last clause? What kind of misunderstanding is he slamming the door on?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Without the clause, "called children of God" could be a courtesy title, a legal fiction, a nickname God graciously uses for creatures who remain, underneath, merely creatures. John slams that door: *and so we are*. The name is not flattery; it describes a fact of birth.

Watch John's vocabulary across the letter: he calls Jesus alone *huios*, Son, and calls us *tekna*, children, etymologically "born ones" from *tikō*, to bear, and says we are begotten (*gennaō*) of God (2:29; 3:9). One is Son by nature; we are children by a real begetting, God's own life communicated to us. The tradition's word is divine filiation, and the Fathers said it more fearlessly than we usually dare: God became man so that men might become god, by participation (CCC 460). "See what love": John expects us to be staggered. Most of us have never once been staggered by our own baptism.

2.

Stay in verse 1 for the sting in its tail: "The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him." Who in this room has felt unknown, misread, or quietly dismissed by the world because of faith? What does John do with that experience?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He reframes it as family resemblance. The world's failure to comprehend serious Christians is not evidence that something is wrong with us; it is the same incomprehension that met the Son himself: "the world knew him not" (John 1:10). Children get mistaken for their Father.

This is not a license for persecution complexes; John's test for authenticity is love, not grievance. But it is real consolation: the low-grade alienation a believing young adult feels in most rooms is not malfunction. It is lineage.

3.

Read 3:2-3. Sort the sentence into three piles: what is true *now*, what is *not yet* revealed, and what we nonetheless *know* about the end. Then verse 3: what does authentic hope actually do to a person?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Now: "we are God's children now," present tense, no waiting period. Not yet: "it does not yet appear what we shall be," the final form is genuinely hidden. Known: "when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." And notice the mechanism: the seeing itself transforms. The Church calls

that the beatific vision: to behold God as he is, and be changed into likeness by the beholding.

So verse 3: "every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." Hope is not optimism or a mood; it is an engine. People clean the house for a guest they know is coming. A Christian purifies a life for a Face he knows he will see. If our hope produced no purification this year, verse 3 gently asks whether it was hope or just a pleasant assumption.

4.

Read 3:4-8. John starts talking about two kinds of people with two origins. Map the two families from the text: who fathers each, what marks each, and what did the Son appear to do (find both purpose statements, v. 5 and v. 8)?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

One family is "born of God," abides in him, does right; the other is "of the devil," who "has sinned from the beginning." The marks are practical, not mystical: righteousness practiced or sin practiced. And the Son's mission is stated twice: "he appeared to take away sins" (3:5) and "the Son of God appeared to destroy the works of the devil" (3:8). Not to manage sin, or lightly forgive it while leaving its machinery running; to take away and to destroy.

This is not dualism; the devil is a rebel creature, not a rival god. It is a paternity dispute, and it is very old. In fact, it is exactly as old as the next question.

5.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Someone find and read Genesis 3:15, God's sentence on the serpent, slowly. What two lines of descent does God establish, what stands between them, and what does this make of John's two families in 3:8-10?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." From Eden's exit, history is a war of two seeds, with God-ordained enmity between them, and a promised offspring of the woman who crushes the serpent's head at the cost of a wounded heel: Christian tradition, from the earliest Fathers onward, has heard the cross in that heel.

John's two families are this verse grown up. The devil "who has sinned from the beginning" is the same serpent; the children of God are the woman's seed, gathered into the Seed himself; and 3:8's mission statement, "to destroy the works of the devil," is Genesis 3:15's head-crushing, announced as accomplished. The whole Bible is a family feud that God started on purpose, and tonight's passage tells you which family you were born into at the font.

6.

Now the hard one, and we take it honestly. Read 3:9: "No one born of God commits sin... he *cannot* sin." Then flip back and read 1:8: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." Same author, two chapters apart. First, feel the problem fully. Then: a friend resolves it by saying "3:9 proves real Christians are

incapable of serious sin, so anyone who falls gravely was never truly born again." Steelman that, then let the letter answer itself.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Honor the reading's strength: it takes regeneration with total seriousness, refuses to treat the new birth as a paperwork change, and it is trying to obey the actual words "cannot sin." That reverence for the text deserves respect, and so does its instinct that birth changes what a creature can be. Name the reading precisely: it is a perfectionist or hardline perseverance reading. Note that most careful Reformed interpreters actually read 3:9 the same habitual way this guide does and reconcile 1:8-2:1 accordingly; where Catholic teaching genuinely differs is on whether one truly born of God can gravely fall and be restored, which the Church affirms (mortal sin, repentance, the sacrament of Reconciliation), rather than concluding the fallen were never reborn.

Now the letter's own answer, in three steps. First, 1:8-2:1 stands in the same document: John tells the born-of-God to confess their sins and provides an Advocate "if any one does sin." A reading that makes John contradict himself two chapters later is a reading in trouble. Second, many interpreters and translations (e.g., "keeps on sinning") take the present tense as pointing to sin as a settled practice; the tense alone does not prove this, but the reading is strongly supported by the letter's own logic, since the same author commands confession (1:9) and provides an Advocate "if any one does sin" (2:1); John paints family portraits by habitual direction, not single frames. Third, and deepest, 3:9 argues from *origin*: "God's nature abides in him" (the Greek says his *seed*, *sperma*) and sin "cannot" come from that seed. Insofar as we act from our birth, from the abiding seed, sin is impossible; when we sin, we have acted from somewhere else, which is precisely why John's constant imperative is abide. To be clear: our sins are still our own free acts, chosen against the grace we received; baptism regenerates but does not remove concupiscence (CCC 1264), which is exactly why John commands abiding, confession (1:9), and points us to the Advocate (2:1). The verse is not a perfection guarantee, and it is not a trapdoor that retroactively unbaptizes the fallen. It is a birth certificate with a family motto on it: nothing from this house produces that.

DIG DEEPER · The seed and the font

What is the "seed" of God abiding in the believer (3:9)? Interpreters, ancient and modern, have heard several harmonics at once: the word of the Gospel implanted (James 1:18, 21; 1 Peter 1:23, "born anew... through the living and abiding word of God"), the Holy Spirit given in baptism, and sanctifying grace itself, the divine life really infused (CCC 1266). All three converge at the font: word spoken, Spirit given, life implanted. Which is why the Church has never read "born of God" as a private emotional event: John's own Gospel locates the birth "of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5).

7.

Read 3:10, the passage's summary verse: the children of God and the children of the devil are "plain" by two tests. What are they, and why does John weld them together with an "and"?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Doing right, and loving one's brother: "whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother." Righteousness and fraternal love, welded, because in John they are one family trait seen

from two sides; the next section (next week) will make love the whole test.

Notice what is absent from the paternity test: religious vocabulary, spiritual experiences, correct opinions held warmly. The secessionists had all three. The children are plain, *phanera*, visible, by how they act and how they love, which means tonight's staggering doctrine lands as next week's uncomfortable question: visible to anyone watching my week, whose child am I?

8.

Close the loop on dignity. St. Leo preached: "Christian, remember your dignity," urging us not to return by sin to our former base condition. Building on Leo, we might say that much sin is forgetting whose child you have become. Where in your ordinary week do you live below your birth certificate, and what would remembering actually look like there?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Let the group work; the pattern Leo names is recognizable everywhere: we do not usually sin because we decide the faith is false, but because for an hour we forget who we are, at the screen, in the argument, in the loneliness. Sin is amnesia before it is rebellion.

And the remedy is verse-3 hope practiced as memory: the person who begins the day with "I am God's child now, and I will see him as he is" walks into the same temptations with a different identity in hand. Leo's charge is this week's assignment, almost verbatim.

SEND · TAKING IT WITH US

1.

"And so we are." Do you actually believe your baptism did that to you? What would change this month if you lived as if 3:1 were literally true of you?

2.

Whose child does your ordinary Tuesday say you are, to a neutral observer? Where is the one place the family resemblance most needs restoring?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1.

Find your baptism date this week (call a parent or the parish if you must) and put it in your calendar as a permanent annual feast. Then thank God for it by name each morning: "Father, you begot me; I am your child now."

2.

Memorize 1 John 3:1 and pray it once, slowly, every time you feel unknown, dismissed, or out of place this week.

3.

Practice Leo's remedy once a day: at your most predictable temptation, stop and say "Christian, remember your dignity," and act from the birth, not the mood.

Closing Prayer:

Father, see what love you have given us, that we should be called your children; and so we are. When we forget, remind us. When the world does not know us, let it be because we resemble your Son. Purify us by hope, keep your seed abiding in us, and bring us to see you as you are. Amen.

Scripture 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, RSV2CE)

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in Session Five, in order of use. All references RSV2CE.

PASSAGE WHERE IT IS USED

Main text, read in sections through the Build

Genesis 3:15

Live discovery, Build 5: two seeds at war from Eden

John 1:10; John 3:5

Builds 2 and Dig Deeper: the world knew him not; born of water and Spirit

Exodus 4:22; Hosea 1:10

Leader background: Israel's sonship, the covenant dream

Genesis 1:26-27

Leader background: likeness lost and restored

James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23

Dig Deeper: born anew through the word

1 John 1:8-2:1

Build 6: the letter answers itself

CCC 1265-1266; 460; 2782-2784

Catechism Connection