

From Acorn to Oak

Who is God, and what is he like? Part 4: Should we call God our Father or He?

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As people were leaving the sanctuary, a new couple spoke with me about the language of the ministers during the worship service at a church I served for many years. “You’re very courageous referring to God so many times as our Father,” she said. “But it was really refreshing to hear that again.”

An increasing number of church leaders today refuse to call God, Father; they say that word, as all human language, is simply a symbol and a sexist one at that. Furthermore, some people have been severely abused by a human father and cannot imagine God as being like their earthly father or any other they have known. They and others argue that we should, therefore, avoid using the term Father out of sensitivity to them. Is that a good idea?

We can agree that the word, Father, symbolizes characteristics of God, especially those pertaining to one of the three distinct Persons who share one essence in the Trinity (*op cit* Part One in this series). However, those of us who hold to the divine origin and authority of the Bible, being written by people chosen and especially guided by God to reveal his Word and his will, would not agree that it is sexist. God values men and women equally and has created both in his image. Further, as we’ve seen, he uses feminine language to describe some of his characteristic behavior. Properly interpreted, one cannot credibly fault God’s Word with gender bias. For a well-detailed explanation of this matter, see the book, *Our Father in Heaven: Christian Faith and Inclusive Language for God*, by theologian Dr. John Cooper.

Since God is spirit (John 4:24), we must be careful to not misapply the words he has used to reveal himself and imply that he has gender. Nevertheless, as Cooper has also written, “most of the Bible’s masculine language has the linguistic function of telling us both who God is and what he is like. In other words, it both identifies and describes God. Scripture’s feminine language only has the linguistic function of telling us what particular attitudes and actions of God are like. This conclusion follows straightforwardly from the fact that the feminine language is imagery [figures of speech likening behaviors that are typically female to certain of God’s attitudes and actions] whereas most of the masculine language identifies God by name, title, or appellative.” (131)

In the Bible the giving of names is the prerogative of one who is in an authoritative or superior relationship to another. Thus, parents name children and a victorious king renames a conquered king. No one names God. He reveals the names (which denote characteristics) by which he is to be called. As such, I’m uncomfortable with the second line of the fourth stanza in the otherwise wonderful hymn, “Holy God, We Praise Your Name.” That line reads, “Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit, three we name you...” Instead of “name” I’d prefer “call” or some similar word.

We should not therefore try to give new names for God, to be politically correct or for any other purpose. He has called us to witness to him as he has disclosed himself to be, not as some would like him to be, which is tantamount to trying to give him a new name. Shakespeare's observation that "a rose by any other name smells just as sweet" does not apply to God. (Acts 1:8, 1 Peter 3:15, John 8:31-47)

God always communicates in terms humans use and understand. The word Father denotes concepts central to the core of Christian theology and connotes meaning vital to human well being. Regarding the former, Father is the standard relational title that designates God's identity. Remember how Jesus taught his disciples, and us, to pray. (Matthew 6:9) Notice also how many times Jesus refers to the Father as "your Father." (E.g., Matthew 5:45; 6:1, 4, 6, 8, 14, 16, 18, 26, 32) Paul quotes God saying, "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." (2 Corinthians 6:18) So we can and should refer to God as our Father.

Further, the title Father is crucial to the person and work of Jesus Christ. In Bible times people understood the king to be the son of their chief god. When Jesus referred to himself as Son and called God his Father and spoke of being one with him, he was making a strong statement as to his divinity, a point not lost on the Jews who then wanted to kill him. (John 10:29-39; cf. also 5:18) Cooper writes, "Most of the scores of occasions when Jesus speaks of...God as *Father*...ought to be read as allusions to the royal father-messianic son relationship that has deep roots in the Old Testament. Thus the God of Scripture is not merely the universal *Father*, an idea found in other religions. He is the Father of Jesus Christ, the Son. This is what distinguishes New Testament faith from all other religions." (108-109) Thus, the title Father is not a simple accommodation to the patriarchal culture of the times.

The understanding that God is our Father fills a deep longing for humans of all time. Sound social science research reveals both the deep need for a father and his impact upon one's life, neither of which has been eradicated by countless attempts throughout history to disregard or dissolve those realities. In the Bible God is revealed as being our strong, compassionate, and faithful Father who loves and protects us. "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him." (Psalm 103:13)

As a pastor I have long known that many people have never seen a dad acting as the Bible teaches fathers should function. Their own father has been abusive or absent physically, emotionally or both; and the ones they see portrayed in the media are usually embarrassingly goofy, downright silly, disrespected by their wives and children, stupid, harsh, or wimpy. And that is just the beginning of a long list of father failures on stage, screen, and elsewhere in society.

Clearly, in certain cases to accurately convey the Biblical message of God as Father might mean beginning with someone else. As Cooper insightfully observed, "begin with some other human relationship through which to enable them to feel love and to trust. But for most people, the need, desire, and ability to relate to a father-figure is still

strongly present. Many people who lack good human fathers gladly and readily receive God the Father as their ultimate security and source of healing. Eliminating the Heavenly Father is neither necessary nor helpful for dealing with the sins of their earthly fathers.” (260-261)

If you do need to begin with another human relationship to help people understand God’s love and justice, such as a caring uncle, do so as a first step toward helping them more accurately form their understanding of the word Father. For example, explain that “The fairness, kindness, responsibility, and love of Uncle So & So is like all fathers who please God, and that characterize certain of God’s perfect qualities.” But refrain from calling God “uncle,” a term God has not given himself.

We must teach God’s Word so as to help people understand the meaning of the terms used in the Bible. We need to teach the language of the Christian community as informed by God’s inspiration and guidance.

In addition to the reasons above, for those who’ve had fathers who have done poorly, we should help these people to redefine their understanding of the concept, Father, shaping the content of that concept according to God’s character as revealed in the Bible. Hard to do? Maybe in some cases. Impossible? Not at all! Such redefining is being done all the time. Contrast the common meaning of just these few words which follow with what they meant only 50 years ago, or less: gay, web, satellite, speed, monitor, tight, hot, sick. (For the current meaning of the last three check with a 20 something young adult.)

We should never hesitate to use the word Father in regard to God’s name. If you had a less than ideal earthly father, you do have a perfect Father in God, who loves you, always hears your prayers (because of your believing in and following Jesus Christ), and always acts on your prayers. For those of us who are fathers, let us look to the Scriptures, observe how our Father in heaven relates to his children...and then follow him!