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A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 7 • Number 2 • SPRING 1998

GOD'S FATHERHOOD AND PRAYER

Tom Wells

The preface of the Lord's Prayer (contained in these words, Our Father which art in heaven) teacheth us, when we pray, to draw near to God with confidence of his fatherly goodness, and our interest therein; with reverence, and all child-like dispositions, heavenly affections, and due apprehensions of his sovereign power, majesty, and gracious condescension: as also, to pray with and for others.

THE LARGER CATECHISM
(ANSWER TO QUESTION 189)

God testifies his fatherly regard to his people by opposing all her enemies.

JOHN CALVIN

A moment's thought will show that God's nature—what He is like—plays a major role in prayer. There are two reasons for this. First, everything we do, everything we think, and our very existence depend on God. Were He a different God, we would be different people, or no people at all! Second, prayer is directed to God, not to others. When we pray, God is not a third party looking on, but the One who receives our prayers and deals with them as He sees fit. What He is like means everything.

Is He, for example, powerful? If not, our prayers are in vain. Theoretically no Christian can deny the power of God, but there is often just enough that is unique about our present circumstances to make us practically doubtful about His power to meet our specific need. That is why, in dealing with the Roman centurion whose servant was ill, Jesus treated belief in His power to heal as faith indeed (Matt. 8:5-10). When the centurion showed faith in Jesus' authority over sickness (or the forces necessary to eradicate it), Jesus "marveled, and said . . . , 'I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel.'" Faith in God, like faith in Jesus, is in part faith in His ability, His power. You will see immediately that other attributes of God must also come into play in trusting Him, such things as His good will toward you and His attention to your prayers (in theological terms, His omniscience). He must be a prayer-hearing God to be a prayer-answering God. One would be useless

to prayer without the other. Yet the Bible shows that prayer, whether or not we grasp how it works, is anything but useless. Tennyson was on biblical ground when he wrote, "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." Is there a word that captures this relation of God to the prayers of His people? There is: the word Father. The word Father is too rich to confine to His relation to our prayers, of course. That is clear. Like all but the most technical terms it means different things in different contexts. For example, it refers to the eternal relation between the Son as the second person of the Trinity and the Father as the first person. It has other uses as well.

The way the Lord Jesus treated His relation to His Father during His earthly ministry, however, offers us a model for our own thoughts of God's fatherhood, and nowhere is this more applicable than in our prayers. Our sonship to God is built on the analogy of His own sonship. He is "the First-born among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29). The firstborn in Israel was the chief heir, but his heirship did not exclude inheritance for other sons. Christ's people, then, are "children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:16-17). We are children by adoption into God's family and "have received a spirit of adoption as sons [and daughters] by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" (Rom. 8:15; cf. Gal. 4:5-7).

Among other things, this will mean that our prayers, especially in the way we address God, will be modeled on Jesus' own prayers. Jesus used the name Father repeatedly in His own prayers (Matt. 26:39, 42, 44; John 17:1, 5, 11, 21, 24, 25) and we are to do the same. The cry, "Father!" ("Abba" in His native Aramaic) must arise from our lips as from His. How do we know this? He told us so when He instructed His followers in prayer: "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father . . .'" (Matt 6:9. Cf. 7:7-11; Luke 11:2; John 15:16; 16:23).

Left to itself, of course, this is a merely formal and relatively unimportant point. Men often use the right turn of phrase when it means little or nothing to them inwardly. Society oils the friction in human relations with formal language that may signify nothing. Think of the word "dear" in the phrase "Dear-John letter," a letter intended to say that John is not as "dear" as he once was! But very often formal language points beyond itself to heartfelt truth. Among those whose hearts have been changed by the Spirit of God, that is the case with Father.

A man, even an ungodly man, may certainly train himself to address God as Father. Theological talk earlier in the century spoke of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, thus encouraging this very thing. But to return to Paul in Romans 8, his point is more subtle. His view is that God has placed the impulse to call God "Father" in all who have been born again, as a cornerstone of our assurance that we are His. Suppose you are uncertain about your own salvation. The prayer, "Father, I don't know if I am a Christian or not!" may show the reality of your relation to God. (Again, that will depend on whether you have taught yourself to say this, or whether "Father" arises as the natural impulse of your heart. No one should rest the weight of his or her assurance on using the right formal language.) How does the name "Father" bear on prayer?

In seed form, Jesus answers that question in His prelude to the Lord's Prayer: "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him" (Matt. 6:7-8). Why did Jesus say this? Let's see if we can tease out the truths that cluster around the word "Father" here. (Note that fatherhood in the teaching of Jesus assumes the ideal that exists in God Himself. Many earthly fathers have fallen so far

short of this that "father" may have no pleasant associations for their children. But we must not let this put us off.)

To begin with, your Father listens to the cries of His children. Jesus makes this point in two ways. First, He tells you that you need not try to get God's attention. You may take "meaningless repetition" to stand for any technique to make the Father hear you: loud cries, pious looks, or "holy" postures. All are unnecessary! More than that, His "hearing" preceded your cry. He already knows your need.

God acts toward His children as one ought to act toward friends. Let this idea soak into your mind! Because children receive discipline they may think that parents have, temporarily at least, become their enemies. But to say, "This man is my friend," leaves the whole idea of ill will far behind. The Lord loves His people more than we love our own children.



This second detail, God's knowledge, deserves a closer look. Jesus' point is not academic; it is a word of encouragement. He does not mean to tell us that whether God helps us or not, He is well able to count up our needs. Not

at all! We need no assurance that God is a good mathematician! The whole point is to say that the God who knows is the Father who provides. Take heart, Jesus says.

Let's look at the implications of this. First, it assures us of God's good will toward His people, His continuing love for us. Those who have faith in Christ are reconciled to God. That means that God and His people are friends. His friends and His children are one and the same. God acts toward His children as one ought to act toward friends. Let this idea soak into your mind! Because children receive discipline they may think that parents have, temporarily at least, become their enemies. But to say, "This man is my friend," leaves the whole idea of ill will far behind. The Lord loves His people more than we love our own children.

In telling you that "your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him," Jesus assumes God's ability, that He is well able to supply your need. This is an advance on the faith of the centurion of which I spoke earlier. Jesus had exhaustive knowledge of the Father (Matt. 11:27). He spoke not by faith but by sight. Three critical things meet in these words of the Lord: God's knowledge (He knows your need), God's good will (He loves His own) and God's power (He is well able to supply your need). You are to think of these things as you use the word "Father" in prayer. Because He is your Father, you will receive what you need.

Another thing comes into play here in connection with God as Father—His wisdom. Think again of the words, "Your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him." When children ask for things, they often ask amiss. That's true of us, as well. What you need and what you ask for, may be two different things. Often you do not remember that as you ask, but your Father does. This is a chief source of what we call "unanswered prayers," prayers to which the answer is "No." Why does our Father not give us all we ask for? Because He is too wise to do so. To sum up the points

we have already made, God's fatherhood includes His knowledge, good will, power and wisdom. Here is another point that bears on prayer. God's fatherhood includes His authority over us as we pray. When Christ prayed to His Father in Gethsemane He made this point repeatedly, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39. Cf. vv. 42,44). He did not have to say, "as Thou wilt." It was already implied in the words, "if it is possible," but He made it explicit because He felt the need to openly recognize His Father's authority. "[N]ot My will, but Thine be done" (Luke 22:42).

There is an important lesson here for us. We may feel an intense emotional attachment to the idea that God is our Father because of the rich gifts we expect Him to send us as His children. And there is nothing wrong with that. He has rich gifts; He does give them to us; they are a cause for rejoicing. Strong positive emotions, good feelings, both in anticipating what He will do for us and in enjoying what we have already received, are themselves gifts of God, not to be despised.

The word Father, however, must always carry with it the idea of His lordship over us. We may not use the sweet associations of the Father's love for us to aid us in disowning His rulership. He retains the right to thwart our desires for reasons that may utterly escape us. He may send us pain and circumstances that frustrate us. We must not act as spoiled children when this occurs. Instead we must seek to praise Him for His sovereignty over us, while we rest in His wisdom and good will. Yes, we are His children, but we are children under discipline. "[I]f you are without discipline . . . then you are illegitimate children and not sons" (Heb. 12:8).

For they [our fathers] disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the

moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:10-11).

There is another way to approach the subject of God as Father, however, besides listing His attributes.



Once more, then, let me sum up: God's fatherhood, as it bears on prayer, includes His knowledge, good will, power, wisdom and authority.

There is another way to approach the subject of God as Father, however, besides listing His attributes. We may ask, "What person is it whom we address as 'Our Father'?" The obvious answer is the first person of the Trinity, the One we speak of when we distinguish Father, Son and Spirit. But is that answer correct?

At first this may seem a strange question indeed. To whom else could we be speaking? If you put yourself in the place of the disciples to whom Jesus gave instruction on prayer, you may readily see another possibility: God the Trinity. Distinctions that jump into our minds between the persons of the Trinity would have been lost on these men during Jesus' earthly ministry. When He said, "Our Father," they could have thought of no one except God without any further analysis. To them, His words meant, "Call God 'Our

Father." Some theologians have thought that is what we do also. We call the entire Trinity "Our Father." That raises the far-reaching question, to what extent may further revelation and the tide of history alter the meaning of a text? At that time, Trinitarian distinctions were unknown to them. Church councils that would adopt the word "Trinity" lay hundreds of years in the future. So what else could "Our Father" mean? Perhaps a small discussion of the process of interpreting Scripture will help here.

When Jesus used the words "Our Father," the disciples could not have understood a reference to anyone but God, without the distinctions of persons. Clearly, this was suitable to the intention of Jesus, or He would not have given this instruction, whether we think of Him as speaking purely from His humanity, or whether we think of Him as speaking as God.



For the purpose of this study let's think of any text as containing three components: first, what the listener might reasonably have understood by it; second, what the inspired human speaker or writer meant by it; third, what

God meant in giving it. Aren't all these things the same? The answer is "Yes" and "No." Acts of judgment aside (Isa. 6:9-10; Matt. 13:10-15), we may assume that God intends for men to understand what He says (2 Cor. 1:13). That means that "what the listener might reasonably have understood by it" falls within God's intention. Further, what the inspired speaker or writer meant also falls within God's intention. The intention of God, however, may be larger than the understanding of either the listener or the inspired writer or speaker. Nothing can change the intention of God, but later revelation and centuries of reflection on what God has said may broaden and deepen our understanding. What we now understand may be both true and fragmentary. Our present understanding may not exhaust the intention of God.

When Jesus used the words "Our Father," the disciples could not have understood a reference to anyone but God, without the distinctions of persons. Clearly, this was suitable to the intention of Jesus, or He would not have given this instruction, whether we think of Him as speaking purely from His humanity, or whether we think of Him as speaking as God. But God's revelation on this point was not yet complete. The materials in the New Testament demand differentiation of the persons, as later centuries defined them. The result is this: Intelligent Christians today, when they reflect on how they use "Our Father" in prayer, almost always refer to the first person of the Trinity. So which is it? Should we address the Father, as distinct from the Son and Spirit, when we say, "Our Father," or should we simply address God?

In the light of the rest of the New Testament we may answer by noting that prayer is usually addressed to the Father as distinct from the Son and the Spirit. That suggests that we should follow suit, keeping the distinct persons in mind. (Compare this from the *Westminster Larger Cate-*

chism where "God" appears to mean the first person of the Trinity: "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, in the name of Christ, by the help of the Spirit . . ." Though prayer is directed to the Father primarily, we must not think that crying out to Christ or the Spirit is forbidden. Each of the persons has the knowledge, good will, power and wisdom to answer us and each exercises authority over us before, during and after prayer. (See the instances of prayer to the Lord Jesus in 1 Cor. 16:22 and Rev. 22:20.)

We may fittingly close with these words from the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 120:

Why hath Christ commanded us to address God thus, "Our Father"?

Answer: That immediately in the very beginning of our prayer, he might excite in us a childlike reverence for, and confidence in God, which are the foundations of our prayer; namely, that God is become our father in Christ, and will much less deny us what we ask of him in faith, than our parents refuse us earthly things.

To Him be the glory!

Author

Rev. Tom Wells is pastor of King's Chapel, West Chester, Ohio. He is author of numerous books and a frequent contributor to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.