

‘Abba, Father!’

There is a certain ‘orthodox’ sound to the words, ‘God the Father Almighty’. The Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed both contain the phrase, so it has been in Christian use for about sixteen hundred years. Of course, the title ‘Father’ for God has been in use ever since Jesus and the first Christians used it.¹

Actually, there is nothing unique about calling God ‘father’. There is evidence that from ancient times ‘peoples, tribes and families pictured themselves as being the offspring of a divine ancestor’.² There are also some significant differences between these Ancient Near Eastern³ texts and the Old Testament, but a general similarity exists.

What is unique in the New Testament is the way ‘Father’ is used. On at least three occasions, in Mark 14:36, Galatians 4:6 and Romans 8:15 the word is used to express the deepest feelings of the heart (for want of a better phrase), by Jesus, by the Holy Spirit and by men and women who have received the Spirit. Somehow it is more than simply the words which are used; instead it is the *way* that they are used which is so potent. Perhaps we could say that there is something ‘revelatory’ in the utterance. For instance, when Jesus said ‘My Father is still working, and I also am working’ (John 5:17), the Jewish leaders were incensed. This was not a matter for scholarly debate; rather, here was a man evidently functioning in a reality which confronted them.

What is more, that reality had broken in upon the first Christians as well. They knew that they had received the Holy Spirit (see Galatians 3:1-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5), and others could also see the evidence of the Spirit’s presence (Acts 10:45-47; 8:14-19). In Romans 8:15 Paul explained the significance (or, at least, *a* significance) of the gift of the Holy Spirit in terms of what must have been a common experience, namely that ‘we cry, Abba, Father’. We can say this because, he has been saying that ‘*you* did not receive a spirit of slavery ... but *you* received a spirit of adoption’ and then says that ‘*we* cry Abba, Father’. A similar picture emerges in Galatians 4:6; ‘And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into *our* hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”’⁴ However, given that when Paul wrote to the Romans he had never been to Rome, the language of Romans 8:15 is important.

Paul was not the only one to speak to believers in this way. Peter wrote to those who ‘invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds’ (1 Pet. 1:17). John said, ‘I write to you, children, because you know the Father’ (1 John 2:14) and adds ‘everyone who confesses the Son *has* the Father also’ (1 John 2:23).

¹ There is also the use of the title ‘Father’ in modern prayers (especially liturgical prayers). It sometimes seems to me that there is every attempt to make sure that the words are correct; we must pray *to* the Father, *through* the Son and *by* the Spirit. It is not cynicism so much as sincere disappointment when I say that any sense of personal communication appears sometimes lost in all this theological correctness.

² Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1964 (1978), p. 11.

³ The ‘Near East’ is now more often called the ‘Middle East’, but in some works (e.g. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament*, Princeton, 1955) the older name persists.

⁴ There is a textual variant which is adopted only in the AV, which reads ‘*your* hearts’. The manuscript evidence in support is quite late, and the reading ‘*our* hearts’ is supported ‘by early and diversified witnesses’ (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies, London, 1971, p. 595). There are no doubts concerning the text of Romans 8:15.

If we add the statements in the Gospels which address God as Father, or which instruct the disciples as to how they should address God, the picture becomes even more vivid. Rejected by whole towns and cities, Jesus responded by saying,

‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him’ (Matthew 11:25-27).

He told the disciples to pray, ‘Our Father in heaven’ (Matt. 6:9) and that is precisely what they did when the Spirit came to them. I am suggesting that what happened to the disciples was nothing like a spirit of pedantry coming upon them, whereby they used the right words; it was the Spirit of adoption whereby they knew themselves to be sons of God and the cry was one drawn out from them by the love of God which the Spirit had brought to them.

God is Father

P.T. Forsyth wrote of those who ‘do not rise to regard God as Father at all’, then added:

Few of us now make that mistake in theory: But most do in practice. Their practical thought of God is not always as Father even if they speak much of the Fatherhood. By practical I mean what really and experimentally affects their religion, colours their habit of soul, moulds their silent tone of mind, helps and sustains their secret heart. They treat God as power, judge, king, providence of a sort. He is for them at most a rectorial Deity. But it is the few perhaps who in their living centre and chronic movement of the soul experience sonship as the very tune of their heart, the fashion and livery of their will. Most Christians are not worldlings, but they are hardly sons. They are only in the position of the disciples who stood between Judaism and Pentecost, who received Christ but had not as yet the Holy Ghost. They are not sons but have only received power to become sons. The fatherhood has not broken out upon them through the cross and caught them away into its universal heaven. The great mass of religion, real and practical as it may be, is not yet sonship. It is more or less earnest, active compassionate. It is Catholic or it is Protestant⁵; it is ecclesiastical, political or pietist; it is eager for the kingdom and set on some form of God’s will. ... But what it does not enough realise in experience (the preacher himself accuses his own) is the centre and summary of God’s will and kingdom, the fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.⁶

Many Christians today defend the words (if they do even that), but we must ask if we know the reality that God is Father.⁷

By ‘reality’ I am trying to say that to call God ‘Father’ is not to use a metaphor.⁸ The word ‘father’, while understood as representing a human relationship, is not merely a convenient term. God *is* Father and human relationships are a reflection of that. In Ephesians 3:14-15, Paul prayed to ‘the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name’. Another translation has it, ‘the Father from

⁵ We might add, Anglican, Baptist or Pentecostal, or whatever. The preoccupation with denominational distinctives is a violation of the true nature of the work of God.

⁶ P.T. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, N.C.P.I., Blackwood, 1987, p. 6.

⁷ I well recall one pastor, a ‘charismatic’ leader well before the Charismatic Movement of the 1960’s, 70’s and 80’s had even been anticipated, telling me that he had never known God as Father. I suppose that what was even more sad was that the rest of the large number of pastors who were present remained apparently disinterested in the whole topic.

⁸ The ‘application of a name or descriptive term to an object to which it is not literally applicable’ (C.O.E.D).

whom everything that is called Father derives its name'.⁹ This is another way of saying that everything that is authentically human is the image of God.

Sadly, the opposite of that is often the way things are understood. People start with an understanding (perhaps!) of fatherhood which is derived from their experiences of human fathers (and mothers) and then assume that fatherhood is a metaphor based on that to describe God. Two extremes, with everything between them, result from this approach. On the one hand there is the complete rejection of God as Father because of the association of that term with 'patriarchy', with the subjugation of women and the denial of their rights and so on. On the other hand there is the elevation of fatherhood to a romantic ideal, where fatherhood means no more than loving (sentimental) compliance with our perceived best interests.

Human fatherhood is far more realistically presented in the scriptures. There were fathers whose godly concern was to protect their children. Job was an example.

And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.' This is what Job always did. (Job 1:5)

Others were persistently evil, so that the example they set to their children had awful consequences. There are many in this category. For instance:

Ahaziah son of Ahab began to reign over Israel in Samaria in the seventeenth year of King Jehoshaphat of Judah; he reigned two years over Israel. ⁵²He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and walked in the way of his father and mother, and in the way of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin. ⁵³He served Baal and worshiped him; he provoked the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger, just as his father had done. (1 Kings 22:51-53)

Most would seem to fit the description by Jesus in Matthew 7:9-11

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ¹¹If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Human fatherhood is hardly a consistent paradigm for true fatherhood. But somehow human fathers, with all their inconsistencies, become a filter through which we tend to view the fatherhood of God. The reason why the failures and weaknesses of human fathers dominate our thinking like this is hardly considered. It is this.

To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted. (Titus 1:15)

Were we to be pure then we would see purely. If we were pure as sons and daughters of our human parents then we would be able to see them as they are, to appreciate their strengths and to forgive their weaknesses and sins against us. We would understand that sin has affected their expression of the image of God and yet we would see that our obedience to them and/or our honour of them need not be avoided, even if it is made more difficult. But where sin has corrupted not only them but also us, then everything is seen though distorted eyes.

For a moment, let us ask why the gift of the Spirit results in the cry 'Abba, Father'. Surely the answer is simple: 'Adam [was] the son of God' (Luke 3:38). Humanity was created to know complete intimacy with God the Father, so this is what

⁹ See, Gustaf Aulén, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, 1960, p. 116, n.3.

is seen in the new creation, the re-new-ed creation. The spirit who was breathed into the first Man comes wonderfully into believers.

Take John's Gospel as an expression of this. John the Baptist declared that Jesus was the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33). Jesus spoke of being aware of the deep things of the kingdom of God only when someone 'is born of the Spirit' (John 3:8). He told the woman at the well that anyone who came to him would know the wells of living water bursting out again within them (John 4:10, 14). The strong flow of the spring of the water of life had been stopped but would flow again. Then at the feast of tabernacles, Jesus cried out,

'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, ³⁸and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."'

³⁹Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37-39)

Once again, it is the picture of the amazing flow of living water. When Jesus is glorified then the Spirit will be given and men and women will know the flow not only bursting up within them but flowing through them.

We are probably familiar with the language, but if we go back to our understanding of Adam's intimacy with the Father then we would be justified in saying that all humanity, all those in Adam, were created to know the life of the Father as their own life and to know that life flowing through them at every point. They would be those who drink from the river of his delights.

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. ⁸They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. ⁹For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. (Ps. 36:7-9)

Those who drink from this river are drinking from the deeps of God. It seems strange to have to say so, but surely this must be the most rich intimacy with God that a creature can ever know. This is what is meant by the word *theosis*, a word meaning the participation by men and women in the divine nature. It is not a mystical thing, a theological 'concept'; it is the very heart of what it is to be human. Adam the son *lives* in his intimacy with the Father. All that he is expected to be and to do only makes sense if he about the will of the Father.

The spirit of Anti-Father

Although the psalmist recognised that the truth of Israel was that 'All my springs are in you' (Ps. 87:7), it was the prophet Jeremiah who recognised the deep evil of the human heart.

Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. ¹²Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, ¹³for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water. ... ²⁷[they] say to a tree, 'You are my father,' and to a stone, 'You gave me birth.' For they have turned their backs to me, and not their faces. But in the time of their trouble they say, 'Come and save us!' (Jer. 2:11-13, 27).

Israel had been called with a view to its being a revelation of the truth of God. Adam, at the fall, had rejected the truth of God as Father and so the truth of his own being. Even though the language of 'fatherhood' (etc.) does not often appear in the Old

Testament it is conspicuous enough to make it plain that Israel was to be a testimony to the true fatherhood of God, especially in contrast to the way the other nations depicted the fatherhood of the deity. Thus, Israel is called the ‘firstborn son’ (Ex. 4:22-23 cf. Jeremiah 31:9), they are ‘children of the LORD [their] God’ (Deut. 14:1). The nations of the world were to be confronted by godly Israel who showed the fatherhood of God to all.

But Israel had been rebellious like all humanity. Moses called them ‘degenerate children’ (Deut. 32:5). It was Jeremiah who highlighted Israel’s rebellion; rather than drink at the fountain of living waters, Israel tried to generate their own ‘flow’, though when they gave their filial homage to trees and stones it is little wonder that they could not see that their cistern was cracked and leaking. Israel still insisted that God was their Father (Jer. 3:4) but could not understand why they were the objects of his wrath. They could not see that the Holy Father must have holy sons.

A son honors his father, and servants their master. If then I am a father, where is the honor due me? (Mal. 1:6)

Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors? (Mal. 2:10).

What must be made plain is that Israel’s Father could not simply forgive.¹⁰ He must judge the rebellion of his children and do so in such a way that the nations will know that his fatherhood is holy and his love strong and purposeful.

His purpose was that the river of living water would again flow from his people and so from all humanity. This is the picture of Ezekiel 47:1-12. When the living water flows again all creation will be transformed.

Seeing the Father

Perhaps it seems a commonplace to us, but ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14). That statement is quite staggering. At last the glory of the Father is clearly revealed. Here is Adam at last! Here is ‘God the only Son, who is close to the father’s heart’ making him known in a way that had never happened previously (John 1:18).

It not that God was not called ‘Father’ previously. He was, as we have seen. But there was nothing like this. The incarnation meant that now there is a man, a human being, who says, ‘I am the declaration of the Father: to see me is to see the Father, since our intimacy is so deep that we are one’ (John 1:18; 14:9; 10:30). Here is a man who not only calls God his Father, but who lives and functions freely as the Son.

We do not have all the details of Jesus’ life, but it is plain that at his baptism by John, he was also given the Holy Spirit in a way that was significantly different from his previous experience. With the gift of the Spirit came the declaration that ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’ (Luke 3:22). John the Baptist recognised this:

I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’³⁴ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God. (John 1:33-34).

¹⁰ Jeremias notes that ‘God always answers [the] appeal of Israel with *forgiveness*’ (*Prayers*, p. 14), but does not note *why* this could be so.

The Synoptic Gospels record that immediately following his baptism he was thrust by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. But what could be tested? The answer is, simply, his Sonship. God had spoken to him and the truth of that word was called into question, just as it had when God spoke the word of command to Adam in the garden. But this Adam did not yield. His food was to do the will of the one who sent him. He did nothing other than what he saw the Father doing, and was obedient unto death, all because he loved the Father (John 4:34; Phil. 2:8; John 14:31).

The passion of the Son was the glory of the Father. Indeed, the Son had no glory apart from the glory of the Father (John 1:14). For that reason, receiving glory from human beings is anathema. Jesus asked the Jews, ‘How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God?’ (John 5:44).

The Son and the Sons

It has been testified somewhere,

‘What is man that thou art mindful of him,
or the son of man, that thou carest for him?’

⁷Thou didst make him for a little while lower than the angels,
thou hast crowned him with glory and honor,

⁸putting everything in subjection under his feet.’

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. ⁹But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one.

¹⁰For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering. (Heb. 2:6-10 RSV).

The Word did not become flesh simply so that there might be one human being who showed out the glory of God. That function was God’s gift to all humanity, as Psalm 8 shows. The reason why Jesus was born¹¹ was that there might be ‘many sons in glory’. Jesus stands as the Adam to whom all glory is given and as the pioneer who brings many sons into that glory with him.

Therefore he had to die. As we saw earlier God does not simply ‘forgive’; he must judge all that denies his glory and he must destroy the spirit of anti-Father. Jesus was one with the Father in this. He told the disciples that it was ‘necessary that the Messiah should suffer ... and enter into his *glory*’ (Luke 24:26). He said to them,

I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father ...yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. (John 16:28, 32)

We should read through John 17 to see the Son in intimacy with the Father, the Holy Father (vs. 11), the Righteous Father (vs. 25), to see him longing to glorify the Father.

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you...’ (John 17:1)

We may be correct to say that Jesus died for us. But we would be more correct to say first that Jesus, the Son, died for the Father.

¹¹ For the sake of clarity, we ought not say ‘the reason Jesus *came*’ because prior to the incarnation there was no ‘Jesus’ and prior to his baptism there was no ‘Christ’. There was the Word, the eternal Son, but ‘Jesus’ and ‘Christ’ designate the human being born in Bethlehem.

‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say — “Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ (John 12:27-28).

With that promise from the Father, Jesus then added,

‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. (John 12:30-33).

Only from the heights of the cross will many sons be drawn to him. Only through the judgment of evil and the bearing away of our sin can we be free to truly worship the living God (Heb. 9:14).

And that is why the cross without Pentecost is inconceivable. Only as the Son deals with our guilt and leaves behind an empty tomb, only when the risen man Jesus is glorified in the Father’s presence can he receive the Spirit *as his to pour out* (Acts 2:33). Only in the ongoing flow of Pentecost is the promise of John 16:12-15 fulfilled.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

All that Jesus had become the right of those who receive the Spirit. Jesus knew the Father in deep intimacy and he knew that the Father had given all things to him. Small wonder that the early church, in knowing that Jesus is Lord, through the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3), knew that

for us there is one God, *the Father*, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:6)

This statement is usually seen in the context of discussions of Jewish monotheism¹² and that would be correct, but it comes not as a discussion point but as a shout born of revelation. God is Father! When I pray, I bow my knees before the Father (Eph. 3:14). In Christ Jesus we are all sons¹³ of God through faith. Divisive distinctions are done away with (Gal. 3:26ff). Through Christ we all have ‘access in one Spirit to the Father’ (Eph. 2:18). The Spirit of the Son cries ‘Abba Father’, so we cry ‘Abba, Father’! This is not a matter of theological precision, *it is the only way it could possibly be*.

Living as sons

Forsyth spoke of those who live as if Pentecost had not yet taken place. For all sorts of reasons that is possible. But how tragic for the church to be satisfied with less than ‘sonship as the very tune of their heart’, for us to live unconscious of our fellowship ‘with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ’.

¹² See N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, Chapter 6, ‘Monotheism, Christology and Ethics: 1 Corinthians 8’.

¹³ There is nothing ‘sexist’ about this. Our sonship has nothing to do with our gender but everything to do with our participation in the sonship of the Son..

Sadly, Jesus was correct when he observed that many, offered the new wine of the kingdom, say ‘the old is good’ (Luke 5:39). It is as if they do not trust God to ‘give good things to those who ask him’ (Matt. 7:11), as if the gift of the Spirit (Luke 11:13) was likely to cause pain and distress. But if the fruit of the Spirit is ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control’ (Galatians 5:22-3), then surely that is the overwhelming truth of the Father.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. (1 John 3:1-3)

If the action of living purely is seen as a threat then it can only be because we *will not* see the love which the Father has given us. But we *must see* what sort¹⁴ of love the Father has given us:

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:9-10)

This is the sort of love that the Spirit has flooded into our hearts, evoking the deepest cries of the Son and the Spirit from our hearts. *We cry ‘Abba, Father’.* We love the Father and we are distressed when our lives do not testify to the holiness of his great name, Holy Father’. And so we long for the day when, without any contradiction from devil, flesh or world, we rejoice in the declaration, ‘I will be his God and he will be my son’ (Rev. 21:7), when our full glory as sons of the Father is seen (Rev. 21:11).

1. Abba! Abba! Father God!

You have filled us with Your love,
Abba! Abba! You are dear:
How we feel Your presence near.

5. All the longings of our heart

Bid us from this life depart
That our eyes Your glory see,
That we may be one with Thee.

2. Thou great Heart—Eternal Love—

Pour upon us from above
Freedom from each bond and chain,
That we may be Yours again.

6. Abba! Abba! Father God!

You have filled us with Your love,
Abba! Abba! You are dear:
How we feel Your presence near.

3. As that son returned from sin

To the father's arms of love,
So we turn, O Lord, to Thee,
Ever in Thy Home to be.

7. Abba! Abba! Father dear,

You will bring us yet more near;
Take us to Your heart of love,
Make us one with You above.¹⁵

4. In the night-time of our soul,

You have healed and made us whole;
You have banished pain and dread,
With Your hand our spirits fed.

© Ian Pennicook, April 2001

¹⁴ Greek, ποταπὴν ἀγάπην.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Bingham, 1986.