



Toward An Understanding of the Theological Importance of Fathering

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The role of the father, as revealed in the Old and New Testaments, is a role that is inextricable from the understanding of salvation and God's grace. Because of that, the father's role in the church is pivotal and of great importance. The following statements explain the importance of fathers.

I. God is a Father.

The word father is used of God fifteen times in the Old Testament (See Ps. 103:13; Prov. 3:12; Deut. 1:31; 8:5; Deut. 32:6; Isa. 63:13; 64:8; Jer. 31:9; Mal. 1:6; 2:10; 2 Sam. 7:14; 1 Chr. 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Ps. 89:26).¹ But God is not simply *like* a father; He *is* a father. Genesis 1:26-27 reads: "*Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*" One immediately notices that it was by divine plan that man was made in the image of God. God, the original Father, creates beings who bear His image, and this separates them from every other living organism. And this image is multifaceted so as to encompass the essence of man and man's identity on earth.

The male and female image-bearers both equally represented the *imago Dei* so that when they came together in marital union they were able to, as Genesis 2:24 states, "*become one flesh,*" a fulfilling spiritual and physical intimacy. This union was designed by God the Father to complete each marital partner, and bring about joy through communication and companionship.

With the sin of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3) the image of God in man is defaced but not removed. Man, now marred by sin, is plunged into a world and a life course altered by sin

¹ Hofus, Otfried, "Father," *Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Vol. 1*, Colin Brown, ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), p. 617.

that is different from what was originally created for him. Yet even so, the grace of God the Father is bestowed on man and woman for He provides the development of the family in the midst of the fallen world.

While God is a father, he is not in the Old Testament considered to be the father of any one man, or of mankind in general. Instead, God is referred to as Father only in his relationship with the people of Israel (Deut. 32:6; Isa. 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 31:9; Mal. 1:5; 2:10) or to the king of Israel (2 Sam. 7:14 par. 1 Chr. 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Ps. 89:26; cf. 2:7). There is a basic difference in the Old Testament's view of God as father and other views of the fatherhood of God held by Israel's neighbors. For *"(i)n the OT God's fatherhood is not understood in a biological or mythological sense, but in a soteriological one. To be a child of God is not a natural state or quality; rather it is grounded in the miracle of divine election and redemption (Exod. 4:22; Deut. 14:1f; Hos. 11:1ff.). Even where, in connection with God's fatherhood, the language of creating and begetting is used, the reference is to the historical elective action of God toward a people, or king, who existed already in the biological sense. When God, the One who elects and redeems, is described as Father, expression is given both to his merciful, forgiving love (Jer. 31:0,20; cf. Hos. 11:8, and to his claim to respect and obedience (Deut. 32:5f.; Jer. 3:4f., 10; Mal. 1:6)."*² In the Old Testament if the individual sees God as his Father it is because of his status as a member of the people of Israel and because he has experienced the work of God in a way that is similar to his redemption of Israel (Ps. 68:5 in the context of verses 4-10.)

In the New Testament, the fatherhood of God is a central idea of Christian theology. While it is not recorded that Jesus ever called God the Father of Israel, he did speak of God as "my Father" and as the Father of the disciples ("your father"). He never joined the two together in a common "our Father." (One remembers that the Lord's prayer is a prayer for the disciples, not Jesus, to use.) Jesus did not teach the idea that God is the Father of all men. Instead, he linked the fatherhood of God to men's relationship with himself. Jesus' consistent use of "my Father" in his prayers (Mk. 14:35; Matt. 26:39, 42 and Lk. 22:42; Matt. 11:25f; par. Lk. 10:21; Lk. 23:34, 46; Jn. 11:41; 12:27f; 17:1,5,11,21,24f.) was something totally new in Israel at the time, and was considered outrageous for it was a personal invocation that spoke intimately of God. In the rest of the New Testament, the uses of the name of Father for God are unanimous in making the fatherhood of God rest upon a basis of Christology and Soteriology. (See especially Ephesians, Colossians, John, and 1 and 2 John).³

II. The Heavenly Father created the family and established the role of fathers.

God provides the means by which the male and female image bearers could reproduce and bring forth others. Hence, in Genesis 4:1-2 God the Father creates fathers, and later mothers, in a continual line through human, image-bearing, offspring. The family was not created by the laying of unattended eggs, or allowed to reproduce through pollination, but was created through intimate relationships that would mold and influence each other.

² Ibid. p. 617-618.

³ Ibid. p. 619-620.

The Hebrew word for father, *'ab*, apparently is derived from Hebrew baby sounds (*'abab*, "Papa").⁴ As used in the Old Testament it describes the gift and command of the Creator that was a role of pivotal and immeasurable importance for the family. The New Testament affirms the Old Testament's understanding of *father*, emphasizing the binding validity of the commandment to honor one's father.

From Scripture, then, we learn of the following important roles a father has in the family:⁵

- A. *A father is the bearer of the divine blessing* (Genesis 27).
- B. *A father is the head of the family, his house* (Joshua 24:15b).
- C. *A father is an authority that must be respected under all circumstances* (Exodus 20:12; 21:15; Proverbs 23:22).
- D. *A father is the family priest* (Exodus 12:3).
- E. *A father is the family's provider and protector* (1 Timothy 5:8).
- F. *A father is the family's teacher and is responsible for seeing that family life is in accordance with the covenant.* (Exodus 12:26f; 13:14ff; Deut. 6:7, 20ff; 32:7, 46; Isa. 38:19, Ephs. 6:1-4; Col. 3:20).

The penalty for disregarding the father's role is severe. The sins of the fathers will find consequences in the generations that follow (Nu. 14:33; Ps. 37:28; Pr. 14:11; Isa. 14:20; Lam. 5:7) God says in Exodus 20:5, "*I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me ...*"

III. Multiple father-led families, set apart by God's covenant, reflect the image of Heavenly Father as "the people of God."

As the story of Genesis unfolds, we see repeatedly that man was not created in a vacuum. Family units are the primary identity points, with multiple family units brought together to be the people of God, the *'am Elohim*. Yet God is holy, and requires that those who would be his people be holy as well, and this takes a very special contract. When God finally seals his covenant with Abraham to establish his people, one notes that from that time on God repeatedly reaffirms it, and at times unveils further provisions for it.

Even though God's people would rebel, God remained faithful to his promises. As the history of Israel unfolds one discovers that while the failure of a specific generation to seek its identity in the covenant with God did not shake God's purposes, it did indeed have an impact on that generation. When a generation failed to live for Him, it experienced the loss of blessings and a deterioration of life. But, equally true, when a generation affirmed their identity as God's People and lived in obedience, God graciously allowed it to prosper and experience many blessings. Lawrence Richards says it well: "*It was particularly important, then for each generation of Old Testament believers to face the issues presented to it in the*

⁴ Harris, R., Archer, Gleason, Waltke, Bruce. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 'ab, (Chicago, Moody Press, 1980), p. 5.

⁵ *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, p. 617

covenant. Would the people recognize God as their God? Would they accept and live out their identity as His people? Or would they turn aside to follow their passions and drift into idolatry, immorality, and injustice? The Old Testament record shows us several times when a generation was called to face this issue and to make a choice.”⁶

Through the Old Testament you find these critical moments when a choice would be called for. In Exodus 24:7, when the people of God are gathered at Sinai, Moses calls on the next generation to affirm the covenant. Years later, Joshua called yet another generation to commitment when in Joshua 24:15 he cries out, *“Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.”* And then he sets the example, *“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”* A powerful truth is reaffirmed in this passage: Joshua, *the father*, leads his family in obedience to the covenant.

IV. Because of Christ’s atonement redeemed fathers and their families are the people of God.

Jesus Christ established a New Covenant between God and man through his sacrificial death. In Luke 22:20, he states *“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”* Those who then partake in this new covenant are the people of God. Paul affirmed this truth in Galatians 3:28, when he wrote, *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”* Also in Romans 11:17 Paul speaks of the church as part of the people of God saying, *“...you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root ...”*

It is one of the distinctives of the New Covenant, *“that while previously the people of God feared even to use God’s title, YHWH, now God’s children are encouraged to address this Lord as father.”⁷* The Aramaic term *’abba* is a very intimate expression that means “daddy,” and was used by Jesus to refer to the Heavenly Father.⁸ The early church understood it had a right to say “abba” in addressing God because of their adoption through Christ as the sons of God (Rom. 8:14ff; Gal. 4:4-7), and also they recognized in Christ the fulfillment of God’s promise: *“I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters.”* (2 Cor. 6:18).

V. Just as the earthly father’s role was crucial in the transmission of the Old Covenant from one generation to the next, it is also crucial in the New Covenant.

Ephesians 6:4 commands, *“Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”* This verse reveals the teaching role the father has in the family, and is very similar to the Deuteronomy 6 and 11 passages that emphasize the father’s teaching and covenant transmitting role in the family. The father’s role is absolutely crucial to the transmitting and maintaining of the New Covenant in the family.

⁶ Richards, Lawrence O. *A Theology of Personal Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1981), p. 16.

⁷ Canfield, Ken R. *The Fathering Issue and Evangelism* (Unpublished paper, n.d.), p. 1.

⁸ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, p. 617.

VI. Two Possible Applications

A. Application #1: Ministries involving discipleship in the church have often failed in the past because they have not recognized the importance of the father's role. They have instead focused on the individual's spiritual growth, and not linked it to the family unit, which is part of the biblical picture of nurture and covenant keeping, and which enhances the entire *'am Elohim*. The contemporary church sometimes seems to emphasize a selfish, individualized spirituality, rather than emphasize the relationship that individual has to the family and the entire church body. We have, perhaps, succeeded in creating a neo-Pharisee subculture as the church enters the 21st century.

As a result, discipleship ministries in the church appear faddish, tend to be program-centered, and are leader-dependent as opposed to having a more biblical focus. Hence there is an emphasis on men rather than fathers, women rather than mothers, kids rather than children related to a mother and father, the accumulation of information rather than practical family application, and the individual rather than the people of God.

Of course men, women, and children should be ministered to, and Biblical information is essential. This is not a denial of the importance of those ministries and the value God places on each individual. It is instead a refusal to limit Christianity to segmented, hyper-individualized, non-connected and non-biblical programs that have plagued the church for years.

It is no mistake that God created fathers, and it is of great consequence if their role is trivialized or ignored in the church. God has put great importance on their role, and has assigned severe consequences that will last generations if their role is not recognized and honored.

B. Application #2: The Church, by focusing on the reclamation of biblical fatherhood, will greatly impact families for generations. If a church is desiring to be truly biblical in its approach to building disciples, it must funnel an appropriate amount of its ministry effort and energy into developing fathers. By rediscovering the biblical role fathers are to have in the community of the people of God, a church will take long strides in restoring a biblical vision to its mandate to make disciples (Matt. 28:19,20). Instead of being faddish, it will consistently approach building disciples in a biblical, God-centered pattern.

In short, it will truly be a disciple-making community, for discipleship will begin in the home and continue through the life span. By emphasizing biblical fatherhood pastors will see the connection to the Old Testament design for building a holy people, and turn from a fragmentation of the family through church programs to a building of a church community by the interlinking of families. Every individual can be impacted because every individual is somehow related to a family. New members who don't have families or are located far from their families of origin, can be first assimilated into a family grouping that can work as their surrogate family of origin. Likewise if churches reclaim biblical fatherhood, fathers will see their importance as caretakers and transmitters of the New Covenant in their families which will enhance the maturity and stability of congregations. In this way the church will

be kept pure as fathers teach and build into their children biblical standards of righteousness and once again view themselves not as isolated Christians but as part of the fabric of the holy people of God, the *'am Elohim*.

It appears that a conclusion one is led to after reviewing the biblical data may be this: *Either churches reclaim biblical fatherhood and begin to build generations of strong, Godly families, or they will commit themselves to something much shallower than what the Bible teaches, and sentence themselves to ongoing internal spiritual weakness.*