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THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

“I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth”
The Apostles’ Creed

Christian Feminists versus Christ and the Creed

By Michael Bauman

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SYNOPSIS

Apart from divine revelation, God remains unknown to us. Meanwhile, that which goes by the name of God is often not God at all, but the truncated misconceptions of our fallen minds. We have a heart-deep and life-wide bias, in Paul’s words, to suppress the truth about God and to make gods for ourselves from created things rather than worship the Creator. We tend to set our hearts on the transitory and the mortal rather than on Him who is Immortal (Rom. 1:18, 23).

We suppress the truth about God in many ways, perhaps the most subtly misleading of which is to remake God in our own image and for our own purposes, as if we can return the favor because He made us in His. By downplaying the fatherhood of God, whether by denying it outright or by relegating it to the realm of culturally generated metaphor, Christian feminists have done precisely that. They have transformed the God of Scripture and of the creeds into the god of modern political correctness, a trend-friendly deity whose primary task is to buttress or embody every new leftist theory that comes down the pike. Christian feminists much prefer to emphasize not God’s paternity, but His allegedly feminine attributes. They prefer to speak of God not so much as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer — images far more conducive to pet projects like the feminization of the clergy.

But it simply won’t do.

Because of the noetic effects of sin, and apart from revelation, the god in our minds often has little resemblance to the one true God outside it. In many ways, the god in our minds is simply a mental idol, a reflection more of ourselves, our desires, our intentions, and our self-serving private agendas than they are of God Himself. There is but one true God, and He is not manmade. He is not humanly concocted. He is the God revealed to us in Christ. All too frequently — and more frequently than we realize — when we think of God apart from His revelation of Himself to us in Christ, we fall afoul of the First Commandment, which prohibits having any other gods but Yahweh. Not that we always do so consciously or intentionally, but we do so nevertheless; and we do so even though we know, deep within us, that the gods of our own making are always unsatisfactory and false.

Neither this problem nor its solution is new. Paul, for example, faced it centuries ago in Athens. In their marketplace, the Athenians had erected a collection of statues to their gods. Apparently the Athenian gods were inadequate, and worshiping them proved unsatisfactory and unsettling, perhaps even a little haunting, because, among those statues, Paul noticed one raised in honor of “the unknown god.” This “unknown god” Paul recognized as the one true God, and, in order to make Him known to the Athenians, he preached about Jesus of Nazareth and about the Resurrection (Acts 17:16ff).

Paul did so because he understood that Jesus Christ is the hermeneutical, or interpretive, key to the universe and to the One who stands behind it. Paul understood that if you want to know what God is like, you must look to Christ.

You do so because, as Jesus Himself said in response to Philip's request to see the Father, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). "I and the Father are one," Jesus also said (John 10:30). By the same token, if you want to know what human beings are like, you also look to Christ, because He is the one entirely true human being. He is the one entirely true human being. He is the one person who really is what a human being ought to be. He is not the flawed and fallen specimen of humanity that we ourselves have become. He is, as it were, the one normal person among us. He is what human beings should have been, not what they are now.

To employ a different image, Jesus is the theological Rosetta stone that decodes for us both God and His creation. Just as the nineteenth-century discovery of the Rosetta stone in northern Egypt, with its trilingual inscriptions, finally helped us decipher the long-hidden meaning of hieroglyphics, so the incarnation of Christ helped us understand the real character, intentions, and mind of God. Apart from the Incarnation, God always remains as mysterious as the hieroglyphics on an ancient Egyptian tomb.

Just as the ancient Athenians misconstrued and misrepresented God, so He is misrepresented and misconstrued today, in this case by so-called Christian feminists who, despite their presumably good intentions, have turned the God of Scripture into a nose of wax.¹ They do so because they have not paid sufficiently close attention to Christ. Of the two things that Christ reveals — divinity and humanity, the one that concerns us most directly here is the former. In that light, Christ Himself, not feminists' projections, is the very definition of the word "God," a word that, without Christ, remains oblique and mysterious. Christ is, in the language of Paul, "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). In other words, God is Christologically defined. Jesus Himself gives the word "God" its proper content. John's way of saying this was to affirm that while no one has ever seen God, God has become known to us because His Son has exegeted Him, or made Him known (John 1:18).

During the Reformation of the sixteenth century, Erasmus tried to teach us how to avoid misconstruing God by applying to Him the ancient Socratic insight that as long as a man remains silent, he remains a mystery. As soon as that man opens his mouth and speaks, one can obtain real knowledge of his character, his intentions, his skill, and his personality. His words are a window to his soul. The same is true of God, Erasmus believed. As long as God remains silent, He remains unknown and unknowable. But silent He has not remained. He has spoken to us, and His message is Christ. The Son of God is God's eloquent and gracious utterance to a fallen world, which is precisely why Erasmus noted that the Scriptures call Him the Logos, or Word (John 1:1). In Jesus, God speaks directly to the deepest needs of the human heart, making known to us His righteousness and His merciful intentions, the depths of which we otherwise could never have known. Without Christ, we are consigned to virtual agnosticism. That is why, when a Christian utters the initial words of the creed: "I believe in God," he or she is not affirming merely the opposite of atheism, but rather his or her belief in *this* God — the God revealed in Christ — as opposed to every other god, however conceived or identified. Because it is biblically based, the Creed stands apart both from atheism and from paganism, including the politically correct paganism of modern Christian feminists and their affinity for goddess theology. The Creed affirms belief in the God revealed in Christ — God the Father.

This is not to say that only Christians have recognized the things articulated about God by the Creed; things like fatherhood, for example. The ancient Greek poets and philosophers, the ancient Hebrew prophets, indeed nearly every major and minor religion, call God "Father." But though the concept of divine paternity is not distinctively Christian, its precise content is, for Christ Himself has given the fatherhood of God a definition for us in space and time. After the Incarnation, no longer can God be compared to a Greek or Roman mythological tyrant, a tyrant who rules the world with arbitrary whim in the face of the subversive intrigues within the pantheon. No longer can He be said to be the abstract, impersonal, first cause or prime mover of the philosophers. No longer is He even simply the exalted God of Israel (though He certainly is that), who thunders from the mountaintop and whose face we cannot see.

God became a man. He walked our roads, ate our food, breathed our air, and spoke our language. He came out from behind the curtain of creation that veiled Him from our eyes. The Author and Director Himself came on stage, and His name was Jesus.

THE NONMETAPHORICAL FATHER

As do both Testaments and Christ Himself, the Creed identifies God as "Father," an appellation that some feminist theologians seem to think is merely metaphorical or is culturally determined and therefore not determinative. But that is a serious error. It overlooks the fundamentally important fact that the Father we meet revealed in Christ is no mere embellishment of human paternity. God's paternity is not human maleness writ large. Human paternity is but

the faint shadow of which God's fatherhood is the enduring reality. To think of it the other way around, as if we ourselves invented God's fatherhood rather than He creating ours, is not simply to get it wrong, but to get it backward.

The paternity of God is not something foisted upon Him by human, chauvinistic ingenuity or by theologians steeped in cultural patriarchy. God's paternity is something revealed to us by His Son, Jesus Christ. God is not a father after our likeness; we are, if we are fathers at all, fathers somewhat after His fatherhood, which is a fact of divine revelation, not human invention. The fatherhood of God is a metaphor only if you make man the measure of all things, which is a theological blunder of the first magnitude. When the Bible calls us "gods," it employs a figure of speech (John 10:34ff); when it calls God "Father," it does not (John 10:30).

We must be clear about this, especially today: the fatherhood of God is not an outgrowth of, or a metaphor for, human paternity any more than the Creed's accompanying assertions that God is "Almighty" and is "Maker of Heaven and Earth" are outgrowths of, or metaphors for, human strength and human manufacturing, respectively. God's paternity is not a metaphor for human paternity. To call the fatherhood of God a metaphor for human fatherhood is as silly as calling the man who casts a shadow a metaphor for his shadow. God's characteristics and activities are not metaphorical of our characteristics and activities, or derived from them. Quite the opposite is true, which is why, regarding the fatherhood of God, the feminist theologians are fully confused. Only God's paternity is the genuine article. Ours is derivative; ours is reflective; ours is the metaphor. To say that God is Almighty, that God is Maker, and that God is Father, as does the Creed, is to speak literal, solid, theological truth.

The fatherhood of God is one of the most fundamental notions both of Christ and of the Creed, a notion according to which all other assertions about God are measured. The fatherhood of God ought to inform every facet of the Christian vision, enabling us to see the universe as our family home and ourselves as God's children, both by creation and by redemption. To shed the doctrine of divine paternity, as so many Christian feminists now are inclined to do,² is simply to distance oneself from the fundamental fact of the historic Christian faith and of the Christ from whom it springs, for not only did Christ reveal God to us as Father, but there was also virtually no other name by which Christ spoke to Him or of Him. When Jesus revealed God to us — and God is revealed nowhere so clearly and so fully as in Christ — the God revealed to us was revealed as Father, and nothing else except as Father. Christ speaks of Him in that way some 160 times. The only time Jesus spoke to Him in any other way was the cry of dereliction from the cross, itself a quotation from the Old Testament. Furthermore, when Jesus taught us to pray, He taught us to begin all our prayers by acknowledging God as our Father.

When Christ told us that to see Him was to see the Father, we learned that fatherhood is something expressed in humility, obedience, service, purity, innocent suffering, honorable death, and victory over sin and the grave. Divine fatherhood, in other words, is love and power exercised on behalf of others. The bond between the Father and us is no longer merely what it was in the Old Testament era. The God of Israel has become our *abba*, an ancient Aramaic word for "Daddy" (Gal. 4:6).

The notion that God is a father, of course, is rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., Exod. 4:22; Deut. 32:6; Isa. 43:6; 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 31:9, 20; Hos. 11:1; Mal. 2:10). What marks Christian doctrine off from Jewish doctrine (and even far more from pagan doctrine) in this regard is not the paternity of God, but the centrality and emphasis given it by Christ. The fatherhood of God was constantly on the lips of Christ, from the time He was 12 and told Mary and Joseph He had to be about His Father's business (Luke 2:49) until the very end of His earthly life, when, on the cross, He prayed for His executioners and commended His spirit into His Father's hands (Luke 23:34, 46). Between those two episodes stand many dozens of affirmations concerning the fatherhood of God. Nor is Christ alone in these affirmations for, as a converted Jew, Paul also affirmed his belief in the fatherhood of God (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 8:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; 11: 31; Col. 1:3), as did all the apostles. For biblical and historic Christianity, the supreme name of God is "Father."

Whether it suits us or not, to reject the fatherhood of God is to reject the religion of Christ, a religion in which God is not Father by mere human attribution, but who is Father both innately and eternally. True and proper fatherhood, not metaphorical fatherhood, resides in Him, not in us and then projected onto Him. Magnification of human paternity onto God can, at best, produce only a superman, something the God of Christ, of both Testaments, and of the Creed most assuredly is not. Perhaps that fact stands behind Christ's command to "Call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, who is in heaven" (Matt. 23:9, KJV). Furthermore, the comparison in Matthew 7:9–11 between divine fatherhood, on the one hand, and human fatherhood, on the other, indicates that even the finest

human fathers are but faint and imperfect echoes of our Father in heaven. Divine fatherhood is no chauvinistic foisting of human fatherhood onto God.

Of course, I am not saying that nothing in us resembles God. It does. I am saying that the resemblance between God and us was put in us by God Himself, not put in God by us. If that resemblance is at all metaphorical, it is metaphorical only on our side, not God's. When the Christian feminists insist that the fatherhood of God is a metaphor, they are simply wrong. The only real and true father in or out of the universe is God. This fundamental fact Christ teaches and embodies and the Creed enshrines. The fatherhood of God is a primary article of confession for a candidate for baptism and is one of the three names into which that candidate is baptized. During that baptism, if it is orthodox, neither that candidate nor the cleric affirms that God is merely a spiritual or metaphorical father. They assert that God *is* Father *per se*. Father is not what God is like; Father is what God is. "To say that God is our Father does not say all that is true of Him, but it is true, and any proposition that is incompatible with this is not."³

Put differently, Christianity could not remain a religion centered in Christ, in His apostles, and in Christian history if it distanced itself from the truths that gather around the scriptural name "Father." To discount that name, to modify it, or to reject it is to disdain both revelation and tradition. Others might do this; not I. We have Christ's own word for it that he who has seen Christ has seen the Father, not the Mother. I cannot say it any more plainly than has C. S. Lewis:

Suppose the reformer stops saying that a good woman may be like God and begins saying that God is like a good woman. Suppose he says that we might just as well pray to "Our Mother which art in Heaven" as to "Our Father." Suppose he suggests that the Incarnation might just as well have taken a female as a male form, and the Second Person of the Trinity be as well called the Daughter as the Son...Now it is surely the case that if all these supposals were ever carried into effect we should be embarked on a different religion. Goddesses have, of course, been worshipped; many religions have their priestesses. But they are religions quite different in character from Christianity...Christians think that God Himself has taught us how to speak of Him. To say that it does not matter is to say either that all the masculine imagery is not inspired, is merely human in origin, or else that, though inspired, it is quite arbitrary and unessential...We know from our poetical experience that image and apprehension cleave closer together than common sense is here prepared to admit; that a child who has been taught to pray to a Mother in Heaven would have a religious life different from that of a Christian child.⁴

THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The implications of God's paternity are many and profound. The first, and for the human condition most important, is the familial relationship this word presupposes. On God's side, this relationship encompasses (among other things) origin, love, intimacy, and care. God is our Father; that means He is the One from whom our being and blessings descend and upon whom they continue always to depend. To Him we turn (or ought to turn) our minds and hearts in utmost love and gratitude.

God's fatherhood is perhaps the most fundamental thing about Him. That is why He is constantly making us — each of us — His children. That is why He is constantly desiring to make a family of us. He will not relent until He has succeeded. His paternity makes it so. When we echo the words of Christ and call God "Father," when we recite the Creed, meant as it is for those who are born again, we are naming God as our Father and Christ as our Brother, a Brother with whom we are the joint heirs of the universe (Rom. 8:17; Heb. 1:2). As the adopted children of God, we claim membership in a family much more extensive, important, and enduring than the human family from which we sprang. To confess belief in God the Father, therefore, is to affirm belief in an ultimately benevolent universe. To confess belief in God the Father is to affirm that you are no mere cog in a mindless machine; you are a child in your Father's home. Notions of God, Christ, and the Creed lacking this concept should be brushed aside as unworthy and as not truly indicative of the God who is.

Second, the fact of God's Fatherhood finds its necessary complement in divine Sonship. To deny the one is inevitably to deny the other. To deny that God is Father because you consign paternal language to sexist motivation is to deny that Christ is Son, and for precisely the same reason. To deny that Christ is Son is to deny the divine revelation in Christ and is to attack Christ's authority and reliability as a teacher of doctrine. As ancient theologians such as Rufinus and others argued many centuries ago, when you hear that someone is a father, you conclude that he must have offspring. Just as no one is properly called "lord" unless he has possessions, servants, and power, and just

as no one is properly called “teacher” unless he has students, so no one is properly called “father” unless he has, in this case, a son. Coupled with what we said earlier, we see that the Fatherhood of God relates to the Son by generation, to us by adoption, and to all other finite things whatever by creation. And, as children typically do, we, as Christians, ought to grow to resemble our Father in heaven and our Brother at His right hand (Rom. 8:29).

The purpose of creation is to raise up beings who, to the fullest extent their capacities allow, know God and enjoy Him forever. This is another way of saying what Calvin once said — the world is the *theatrum gloriae Dei*, the theater of God’s glory. As witnesses to, and beneficiaries of, that gracious glory, we are more than mere spectators. We are to express what we have seen, to applaud it, and to articulate it. To do so is the joyous business of the redeemed and is a chief part of our destiny and purpose. For that and for all other blessings, we thank and praise “Our Father, who art in heaven.”

Michael Bauman is Professor of Theology and Culture at Hillsdale College, where he is also Director of Christian Studies. Along with David Noebel, he is coeditor of *The Schwarz Report*.

Notes

1 See, e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983); Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

2 See Daly, 1–43; Johnson, 3–103 and 224–25; Chopp, 107–115; Ruether, 47–71.

3 G. K. A. Bell, ed., *The Meaning of the Creed: Papers on the Apostles Creed* (London: SPCK, 1917), 18.

4 C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 236–37.