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FAIMY, FAITH AND FATHER

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SYNOPSIS

The spectacular success of the *Star Wars* saga is, among many others things, a testimony to the powerful hold that family exercises on American society. In particular, the longing for father is a common deeply felt need. As Christians, we recognize that this longing is not just for our human father but also for our heavenly Father. At the heart of the gospel is the truth that we become adopted children of God through faith in Christ. But *our* family relationship with God is not the ultimate truth of Christianity, because it is in turn based on something even more ultimate: God's eternal relationship with His Son. In the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus links our love for one another to His love for us and the Father's love for Him. In the High Priestly Prayer, He prays that believers would share love, joy, and oneness with one another just as He has shared love with the Father before the world was created. While the theology of *Star Wars* is almost all wrong, the longing for a father that it illustrates can be a stepping stone to our understanding of the heart of the gospel. God made us so that He could be our Father in a way that reflects His fatherly relationship to His only Son. And when, through sin, we lost that initial gift, He resolved to give it to us yet again, by sending that only Son to die and make us the sons and daughters of God the Father, and thereby making us brothers and sisters of Christ.

If your family is like mine, you are eagerly waiting for the eighth installment of the *Star Wars* saga, *The Last Jedi*. My teenage children have watched and rewatched the first seven and have even listened to me describe the national sensation that *A New Hope* (then called simply *Star Wars*) caused in the summer of 1977, when I was a teenager myself. What is it about this series that has so captivated the world for forty years now? The glitzy special effects are surely part of the appeal. The theme of good versus evil seems to resonate with a culture increasingly unable to use such labels with any

confidence. But surely one other reason for the *Star Wars* saga's success is its focus on the search for family, especially the search for one's father.

In the original trilogy, just as central as the destruction of the Death Star is the quest for family, leading to Luke's and Leia's recognition that they are twins and to Luke's eventual acceptance of the fact that Darth Vader is his father. The prequel trilogy is essentially an explanation of how that family came to be, with the descent from democracy to empire (a cinematic nod to the actual history of ancient Rome) as the societal canvas on which the family relationships are painted. Then *The Force Awakens* leaves us with Rey — who has spent her whole life waiting for her family to return to Jakku — standing in front of Luke offering him his old lightsaber. Surely he is her father, right? Right?

Of course, Christians have deep disagreements with the “theology” of *Star Wars*. The Force itself is impersonal and not remotely Christian. Nevertheless, the extraordinary popularity of a movie series built around the theme of family and familylessness, father and fatherlessness, testifies to an immense human longing not just for any kind of belonging but for *family* belonging. The reason this theme is so powerful is that we are created to be in relationship to one another and to God. We are meant to have God as our Father, to be His children.

Behind and at the root of the many other aspects of Christian salvation — forgiveness, justification, new life, and transformed living — is the monumental reality of God as Father and us as His children. When we are saved, we join God's family. In this sense, Christianity provides the right answer to the human longing for family and father that so thoroughly permeates the *Star Wars* saga. Christians can affirm the *longing* represented in the films even though we do not believe that the movies' *fulfillment* of that longing — human families undergirded by the mysterious Force — is actually the correct or the ultimate resolution.

Indeed, when we say that our sense of belonging to a family comes through being children of God, even that statement, while very true, is not *ultimate enough* because *our* family relationship to God is not ultimate. It is itself a reflection of something even higher: God's own relationship with His eternal Son.

BEYOND “A LONG TIME AGO...”

The entire Bible is the story of God's relationship with the human race, especially with His people Israel and His new people, the church. Scripture begins with God's creation of the heavens and the Earth, the dwelling place for the human beings He would soon create, and it ends with the new heavens and the new earth, the place where He will spend eternity with His people. But God's relationship to His people is neither the first nor the most important of His relationships. John 1:1 proclaims a relationship that predates the creation of people: in the beginning, the Word was already there, with God, and identified with God. After this Word became flesh, we know Him as Jesus, the Messiah (Christ). Before the world or anything else was created, there was the Word/Son/Jesus/Christ, with God, in a relationship.

The Father's Love for the Son

Scripture says very little about what God and the Word — or the Father and the Son — were doing before they made the world. But as Jesus eats the Passover with His disciples just hours before He will be betrayed, He draws back the curtain and gives the disciples a glimpse at the way their relationships with one another are connected to His relationship with God the Father. He does this through two crucial statements during His conversation with them that we call the Upper Room Discourse (John 13–16).

The first statement comes in John 13. Jesus has just washed the disciples' feet, an astonishing demonstration of servanthood. Then in 13:34–35, He says, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."¹ Jesus says that our love for one another is connected intimately to His love for us. As He has loved us, so we are to love one another. What is the nature of this connection? I suggest that Jesus means more than just that we should love *because* He has loved us or that we should love *like* He has loved us. Jesus means we should love one another *with the very same love* with which He has loved us.

Sharing the Love

Jesus goes deeper into the connection between our love and His in the second crucial statement two chapters later. He begins John 15 with the famous vine and branches metaphor, which signifies a very deep, somehow even organic, connection between us, Christ, and God. Then in 15:9–10, Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love." Here Jesus claims that His love for us is connected to the Father's love for Him. We are to remain in *the very same* love with which Christ has loved us, which is in fact *the very same* love with which the Father has loved Christ. We are called to do more than simply imitate God's love. We are called to remain in, and to carry forward to the world, the very love with which the Father has loved His Son. The loving relationship between Father and Son is not simply a model that we are to follow. That relationship is the very substance of what Jesus says Christians are to possess. Christ is not simply giving us an example. He is giving us a share in His most deeply personal relationship, with God the Father.

Jesus' striking assertions in the Upper Room Discourse set the stage for an even more stunning passage in His High Priestly Prayer (John 17), in which He asks His Father to bring about the kind of life He has just described to the disciples. Near the end of the prayer, Jesus prays for all future believers:

...That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be

one as we are one: I in them, and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. (John 17:21–24)

Notice that when Jesus prays that Christians would be “one,” He explains this idea by saying that He is *in the Father*, the Father is *in Him*, and Christians are to be *in the Father and the Son*. For followers of Jesus to be one with each other is somehow tied to the relationship between the Father and the Son. Notice also that the unity between Christians is to be a major sign to the non-Christian world that God has sent Jesus. Third, notice that Jesus ties oneness to love. In fact, He has talked a great deal about love in the Upper Room Discourse, and now as He prays for Christians, He speaks not only of love but also of oneness. Saying that Christians should be one in the same way the Father and Son are one means the same as saying that Christians should love one another with the same love the Father has shown the Son. Fourth, notice that Jesus speaks of eternal glory — of the presence of the Father with Him before the world was created — and He ties that presence to the Father’s love for Him.

To say that the Father and Son are “one” and are “in” each other is to speak of the love they have for each other, and Jesus says they have shared this love from all eternity, from before the time when they made the world. The glory of God has shone forth from all eternity past, through the loving presence of the Father with the Son (and the Holy Spirit, but Jesus does not mention Him here). After God made the world and placed human beings in it, His desire for us was that we share that same glorious love with Him and with each other. Jesus prays that those who follow Him may be one with each other in the same way that He is one with the Father.

At this point, one might want to ask, “What does it *mean* for us to share in the love between the Father and the Son?” What does it mean for us to be “in” Christ in the way the Father and the Son are “in” each other? Here we move deeply into the fundamental mystery of the Christian faith, but to try to understand this mystery, we need to look not just at what Scripture has to say about Christian life but also what it says about *human* life in the beginning.

LIFE AS IT WAS MEANT TO BE

It is often said that one of the most basic human needs is for a sense of significance. This is part of the reason we often speak of our need “to be a part of something bigger than ourselves.” But one of the ways modern Western society has sapped people’s sense of significance is that it has tied that significance to something that is generally out of reach: celebrity. We fawn over movie stars, athletes, and others who have gained fame and fortune.

Significance

This cult of celebrity sends us a constant, subliminal message that *we* are not really very important. So what do we do? Since we cannot do what it would take to become celebrities, we try to attach ourselves to the celebrities themselves. If our society is going to tell us that we are not very significant and cannot do what it would take to become important, then we are determined to become *virtually* important, to pretend that we somehow have a connection with the people our society says are really significant. But beneath the superficiality of virtual celebrity lies something that really *is* important, namely, the idea buried within each of us that to be significant, we need to be *attached to someone who is significant*.

Christianity teaches us that our significance does not ultimately lie in what we accomplish or what we do; it lies in the one to whom we belong. Genesis 1 indicates that we human beings have been created in the image of God. The implication is that we do not need to do *anything* to acquire significance. Instead, we already possess a significance greater than that of any other created beings, simply by virtue of being made in God's image. There is nothing we need to do — indeed, nothing we could *possibly* do — that would make us any more significant than we already are.

Created in His Image

The biblical truth that we have been created in God's image does more than just give us significance; it also establishes a direct connection between us and God's Son. Colossians 1:15 proclaims that the Son "is the image of the invisible God," and Hebrews 1:3 calls the Son "the exact representation of his [the Father's] being." God's Son, Christ, is the perfect, *uncreated* image of His Father, and we are created in His image. We are the created resemblances of God's uncreated Son, and this fact places us not merely in a privileged *position* with respect to other created beings but also in a privileged *relationship* with God Himself. We are created to mirror the Son and thus to share in His relationship with the Father.

In addition to this direct link between human beings and the Son, there is also a link between humanity and the Holy Spirit in the descriptions of creation. Genesis 2:7 reads, "The Lord formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Most interpreters see this event as God's giving Adam a soul. However, this passage is tantalizingly similar to Jesus' later words after His resurrection. John 20:21–2 tells us, "Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that, he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" Notice that in both of these passages, God/Jesus breathes on Adam/the disciples. In light of these similarities, Genesis 2:7 may mean that God breathed the Spirit of life (that is, the Holy Spirit) into Adam, just as Jesus later breathes on the disciples as a way of communicating the Holy Spirit to them.

If this is correct, then Adam and Eve as originally created shared directly in the person of the Holy Spirit and mirrored in a created way the uncreated Son, the exact and perfect image of God. Thus, humanity as originally created was linked directly and

personally to the Trinity. Moreover, such participation in the Father–Son relationship was not meant to be purely vertical. People were also meant to share that same fellowship among themselves.

Genesis 2:18 indicates that even when Adam was surrounded by God’s presence and by all the wonders that God had made, he was still “alone” in a sense that was somehow “not good.” So God created Eve from Adam’s rib, gave her to Adam as his wife (Gen. 2:21–2), and commanded the two of them to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28). These passages hint that God intended human beings to share His presence both with God and with each other. He even wanted to ensure that there would be *more* people around who could share this presence with each other.

The relationship between the Persons of the Trinity was so valuable that God created people in His image to share in that relationship; and this sharing was meant to take place not merely through people’s relationship to God but also through human relationships with one another. Through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, humanity was initially linked to God and called to embody the Son’s relationship to God. Human life as God meant it to be, as God created it initially, was life in the Trinity.

Fellowship and Failure

Of course, human life did not remain as it was meant to be. Our first parents turned away from God, seeking their own moral autonomy rather than obeying the commandment by which He had invited them to remain in the life of the Trinity. As a result, they — and we who are descended from them — lost the fellowship with God for which they had been created, became guilty in God’s sight and subject to death, and were forced to live with relationships to one another that bear little resemblance to life as it was meant to be. But that tragic fall was not the end of the story. Indeed, almost immediately, God announced that someone was coming, the “Seed” (later called the “Messiah”), who would crush the head of the serpent who catalyzed humanity’s fall. This announcement set in motion a series of events that culminated in the Incarnation and human redemption.

THE ONLY SON BECOMES THE *FIRSTBORN* SON

At the very heart of the varied aspects of salvation lies the truth that we become sons and daughters of God. (Hence the theme of father and son with which I began this article.) Our sonship to God is both different from, and directly linked to, Christ’s own sonship to God. Consider the fact that the New Testament calls Christ both God’s “one and only Son”² (see, e.g., John 1:14; 1:18; 3:16; 1 John 4:9) and “firstborn among many brothers” (see Rom. 8:29). How can He be *firstborn* among many if He is the *only* Son? The answer to this question is that we have to think of Christ in two ways, “as God” and “as man.”

Christ, when considered as God, is the only Son. He is the one, true, natural Son of God, equal to the Father. He is the only one who has been in a filial relationship

eternally with God the Father. But when the same Christ is considered after the Incarnation as a human being, He is the first of many brothers and sisters. The Son has become human in order to make Himself our brother so that we could then become the adopted daughters and sons of His Father, God. The Son by nature has made us sons and daughters by grace. We are brought into the relationship through God's action; it is *conferred on us* rather than being our natural birthright.

Love and Longing

This brings us back to the Upper Room Discourse and the High Priestly Prayer. As Jesus is about to die for the sins of the world, He calls His disciples together to explain to them the link between themselves and Him. He explains the connection between their love for each other and the Father's love for Him, between the unity He prays they will exhibit and the love He has known with the Father before the creation of the world.

The theology of *Star Wars* is almost all wrong, of course. But the longing that pervades the film series and fills the hearts of its millions of fans is genuine — the longing for father. God made us so that He could be our Father in a way that reflects His fatherly relationship to His only Son. When we lost that initial gift, He resolved to give it to us yet again, by sending that only Son to become our brother, so that we could become the Son's sisters and brothers, and thus the sons and daughters of God the Father Himself.³

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NOTES

- 1 All Bible quotations are from the New International Version.
- 2 The Greek word is rendered "only-begotten" in some translations.
- 3 This article is adapted from Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (IVP Academic, 2009).