

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

FATHERHOOD THE FINAL IDEA OF GOD.

IT is an attractive theory that the spiritual dominates the physical, and the soul, in the long run, selects its own body: it is an evident fact that life is created by thought, and every action has its root in the Unseen. What one thinks to-day, he will do to-morrow; and the first equipment for living is a creed. No one is so simple that he does not hold some article firmly—it may be attachment to his tribe: no one is so liberal that he has cleansed his house of every article—he will possibly deny the knowledge of God. Totemism and agnosticism are the extremes of belief; but the immense variety between those brackets proves that whether one affirms or denies, he must have a belief as he must have a home. History proves the necessity of a creed: experience proves its effect. As the light of the sun colours the tiniest blade of grass, so the idea in the background of the mind tinges every detail of life. We grant that a man's theology will be built on his belief, and will follow its lines to the highest pinnacle. This is a grudging concession, a limited analysis. The energy of a human life, however it may have been fed on the way, and whatever common wheels it may turn, arises from the spring among the hills. Belief gives the trend to politics, constitutes the rule of business, composes the atmosphere of home, and creates the horizon of the soul. It becomes the sovereign arbiter of our destinies, for character itself is the precipitate of belief.

Belief, within the sphere of religion, has a wide range, but its centre is God. Tell me what is your conception of God, and I will work out your doctrine of man, of forgiveness, of life, of punishment. Given the axioms, and geometry is only a question of process. Given your God, and your whole theology can be constructed within a measurable

time. The chief service of a prophet is not to rebuke sin, nor instruct in virtue: it is to give the world a radiant idea of God. Has he no word on God? Then his silence is irreparable—every other doctrine will be isolated and fruitless. Has he a fitting idea of God? Then his blank chapters can be supplied; they are contained in the introduction. If a prophet deal after a satisfying fashion with the idea of God, he will be permanent. If a prophet complete and crown the idea of God, he will be final. Many may expound him: none can transcend him. Jesus taught the world various principles of religion—the nature of faith, the glory of sacrifice, the secret of peace, the strength of love. These were the splendid incidents of His Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus was the revelation of God.

Jesus availed Himself of what existed, and began with the assumption of God. He never fell into the *banalité* of theology, and set Himself to prove the existence of God, which is as if a geologist should introduce his science with an argument for the reality of the world. When one has to begin before the beginning, he is filled with despair, for that way lies madness. We are entitled to take some things for granted, as, for instance, the evidence of our senses and the teaching of an instinct. Belief in God is an instinct, a part of the constitution of the soul. It may be confirmed and illustrated: it must not be proved, for the proof of an instinct is its denial. When Jesus said God, He appealed to the belief latent in every human being, and called it into a nobler exercise. He did not create the idea of God—He illuminated it.

Jesus availed Himself also of what had been done, and accepted that character of God, which was the discovery of ancient piety. As the belief in God began with the first father of the Race, the doctrine of God began with the Hebrew saints. Long centuries before Jesus patriarchs and prophets had been wrestling with the problems of the

Divine Being and the Divine Name. With the sword of faith and great travail of soul, those pioneers of religion had conquered, foot by foot, the land of promise, and left it as an heritage unto their children. They had extricated the idea of God from the work of men's hands and the phenomena of nature: in later days the pious Jew guarded it from the abstractions of philosophy and the corrosion of scepticism. This monotheism was not the natural tendency of the Semite, born of the desert environment—that ingenious naturalistic theory is now exploded; it was the slow, painful attainment of Hebrew faith reinforced by the Divine Spirit. We owe the “Living God” to the Jew, and as often as this sublime conception is obscured or sapped by the eccentricities of modern speculation the religious consciousness must fall back on the masculine vigour and ethical grandeur of Old Testament thought.

The genius of the Jewish mind was not metaphysical; it could not have produced the Athanasian Creed: it was ethical; it is embodied in the Ten Words. With the Jew, therefore, God was not abstract Being—the First Cause of things. He was actual character, the “Holy One of Israel.” Jehovah dwelt in the high and holy place, and with him also of a humble and contrite heart; and if He “maketh the clouds His chariot,” and “walketh upon the wings of the wind,” His “righteousness is like the great mountains,” His “judgments are a great deep.” There grew in the consciousness of this people the idea of a God who was not only real—no carved and painted log of prophetic satire, but also moral—no complacent deity tasting the sweetness of his worshippers' sins. They verified His character in the disasters that followed national corruption, in the swift recoveries that rewarded national repentance. In the mirror of a cleansed conscience the prophets saw the face of God; they traced His life in the processes of righteousness. We fail sometimes to appreciate the force of this discovery;

we forget to imagine the surprise. With moderns, Deity and virtue are synonymous; with ancients, deities and vice were synonymous. Upon two hills only was the Divine raised above the

“Howling senses’ ebb and flow.”

One was the Acropolis where the golden shaft in Athene’s hand guided the mariner on the Ægean Sea. The other was the Holy Hill where Jehovah remained the refuge of every righteous man. But the advantage lay with the Jew. The wisdom of Athens was seated in reason, and did not affect life: the wisdom of Jerusalem was seated in conscience, and created conduct. The Jewish Savonarola who thundered in Jerusalem, “Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes,” had come out from a secret place where the Seraphim said, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts.”

Jewish piety has laid the world under a hopeless debt by imagining the austere holiness of God, and has doubled the obligation by adding His tenderness. It was an achievement to carve the white marble; a greater to make it live and glow. The saints of Israel touched their highest when they infused the idea of the Divine spirituality with passion, and brought it to pass that the Holy One of Israel is the kindest deity that has ever entered the heart of man. There was no human emotion they did not assign to God; no relationship they did not use as the illustration of His love; no appeal of affection they did not place in His lips; no sorrow of which they did not make Him partaker. When a prophet’s inner vision had been cleansed by the last agony of pain, he dares to describe the Eternal as a fond mother who holds Ephraim by the hands, teaching him to go; who is outraged by his sin, and yet cannot bear that Israel should perish: as a Husband who has offered a rejected love, and still pleads; who is stained by a wife’s

unfaithfulness, and pursues an adulteress with entreaties (Hos. xi. 1, ii. 14). One cannot lay his hand on the body of prophetic Scripture without feeling the beat of the Divine Heart: one can detect in its most distant member the warmth of the Divine love.

Your first conclusion is that faith can go no farther: your second reading reveals one significant reserve. Prophets continually call God the Father of the nation; they never (with one doubtful exception) call Him Father of the individual. Psalmists revel in an overflowing imagery for God, but one word lying to their hand they do not use. He is the "Shepherd of Israel" and "our dwelling-place in all generations" (Ps. lxxx. 1, Ps. xc. 1); He is the "Rock of my Salvation" and a "very present help in trouble" (Ps. lxxxix. 26, Ps. xlvi. 1): He is the "Health of my countenance," and "thy shade on thy right hand" (Ps. xlii. 11, Ps. cxxi. 5); but He is not Father. King is the Psalmists' chief title for God and his highest note. "The Lord reigneth." These saints are unapproachable in their familiarity with the Eternal; they will argue and complain; they will demand and reproach, but never at any moment are they so carried beyond themselves as to say "My Father." They are bold within a limit: they have restraints in their language. It is not a refusal to say Father, because the idea is an offence: it is an unconsciousness—because the idea has not yet dawned. The clouds which had gradually risen from the base and sides of the doctrine of God still veil the summit.

When one passes from the Gospels to the Psalms he is struck by the absence of Father. When one returns he is struck by its presence. The Psalmist never said the word; Jesus never said anything else. With Jesus God and Father were identical. Fatherhood was not a side of Deity; it was the centre. God might be a King and Judge; He was first of all, and last of all, and through

all, Father. In Fatherhood every other relation of God must be harmonized and find its sphere. Short of His Fatherhood you cannot stop in the ascent of God. Under Fatherhood is gathered every other revelation. Jesus reasoned in terms of the Father: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to those that ask Him?" (St. Matt. vii. 11). He laboured in the fellowship of the Father: "I seek not Mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent Me" (St. John v. 30). He rested in the wisdom of the Father: "In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in Thy sight" (St. Luke x. 21). And Jesus suffered in the faith of the Father: "Therefore doth My Father love Me because I lay down My life that I might take it again. . . . This commandment have I received of My Father" (St. John x. 17). When the consciousness of God awoke with power in the soul of the Holy Child, He was filled with a sudden enthusiasm, "Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business?" (St. Luke ii. 49). When He had fulfilled His calling and offered His sacrifice, His soul turned to His Father: "Father, into Thy hands I commend My Spirit" (St. Luke xxiii. 46). From Nazareth to Calvary the love of the Father was Jesus' dwelling-place.

"In that one thought He abode
For ever in that thought more deeply sinking."

No one can ignore this constant and radiant sense of the Divine Fatherhood in the life of Jesus. It must be a suggestive fact to an unbeliever, for it will be admitted on every hand that Jesus knew more about Religion than any man that has ever lived. It ought to be an absolute conclusion to a believer, since he holds that Jesus is Himself Very God of very God.

It goes without saying that Jesus' sense of the Fatherhood must be supreme. It is a contradiction of the Gospels to say that it was exclusive. Jesus toiled for three years to write the truth of the Fatherhood on the minds of the disciples with at least one result, that it is interwoven with the pattern of the Gospels. He pled also with His friends that they should receive it into their hearts till St. John filled his epistles with this word. With minute and affectionate care, Jesus described the whole circle of religious thought, and stated it in terms of the Fatherhood. Prayer was to be to the Father: say "Our Father, which art in heaven" (S. Luke xi. 2). The principle of life was the Will of the Father: he only attained who had done the "Will of our Father which is in heaven" (S. Matt. vii. 21). The type of character was the Father: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (St. Matt. v. 48). Providence is the mindful oversight of a Father: "Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things" (St. Matt. vi. 32). Repentance was a return to the Father: "I will arise and go to my Father" (St. Luke xv. 18). One of the few rays Jesus cast on the future showed the Father's dwelling-place: "In My Father's house are many mansions" (St. John xiv. 2). The effect of such passages is cumulative and irresistible. They are better than the proof texts for a dogma; they are an atmosphere in which religion lives and moves and has its being. They are sunrise.

People with dogmatic ends to serve have striven to believe that Jesus reserved Father for His disciples; but an ingenuous person could hardly make the discovery in the Gospels. One searches in vain to find that Jesus had an esoteric word for His intimates, and an exoteric for the people, saying Father to John and Judge to the publicans. It had been amazing if Jesus were able to employ alternatively two views of God according to His audience,

speaking now as an Old Testament Prophet, now as the Son of God. It is recorded in the Gospels, "Then spake Jesus to the multitude and His disciples, saying, . . . one is your Father, which is in heaven" (St. Matt. xxiii. 1, 9). This attempt to restrict the intention of Jesus is not of yesterday; it was the invention of the Pharisees. They detected the universal note in Jesus' teaching; they resented His unguarded charity. Their spiritual instincts were not wide, but they were very keen, within a limited range, and the Pharisees judged with much correctness that the teaching of Jesus and the privileges of Judaism were inconsistent. If a publican was a son of God, what advantage had a Pharisee? It was natural that they should murmur: we are now thankful that they criticised the Master. Jesus made His defence in His three greatest parables, and in the parable of the Prodigal Son He defined the range of the Divine Fatherhood beyond reasonable dispute. His deliverance was given with deliberation—in Jesus' most finished parable; the parable was created for a definite purpose—to vindicate Jesus' intercourse with sinners. It contains Jesus' most complete description of a sinner—from his departure to his return; it declares with emphasis that sinner a son of God—a "son was lost and is found." Between the son in the far country and the son at home is an immense difference; but if he had not been a son from home, there had been no home for his return. The possibility of salvation lies in sonship. It would not be fair to rest any master doctrine on a single parable, were it not that the parable is Jesus' definition of Fatherhood, given in answer to the practical challenge of privilege, were it not that it simply crystallizes the whole teaching of Jesus or God from His boyhood to His death. If Jesus did not teach a Divine Fatherhood embracing the Race, then He used words to conceal thought, and one despairs of ever understanding our Master.

When Jesus speaks of Fatherhood, it is almost a stupidity to explain that He is not thinking of any physical relation—the “offspring” of the heathen poets, and that Father is not a synonym for Creator. Jesus rested His own Sonship on community of character. God was love, for He gave His only Son, and Jesus was love, for He gave Himself. He realized His Sonship in community of service. “My Father worketh hitherto, and I work” (St. John v. 17). The bond between son and father in the spiritual world is ethical. It is perfect between the Father and the Son in the Holy Trinity: it is only a suggestion between a sinner and God. As one can detect some trace of likeness between a father and his son, although the son may have played the fool, and defiled the fashion of his countenance, so the most degraded and degenerate of human outcasts still bears the faint remains of the Divine image. The capability of repentance is the remains of righteousness; the occasional aspirations after goodness are the memories of home; the recognition of right and wrong is an affinity to the mind of God. The sonship is hidden in Zaccheus and Mary Magdalene—a mere possibility; in St. John and St. Paul it is revealed—a beautiful actuality, so that this paradox is only the deeper truth that one may be, and yet become, a son, as the ethical likeness is acknowledged and cleansed. Jesus’ message was, “You are a son.” As soon as it was believed Jesus gave power to live as a son with God (S. John i. 12).

With this single word “Father,” Jesus instantly defines the relation of man and God, and illuminates theology. He transfers the Divine idea from the schools, where they discuss the Sovereignty of God, to the hearth where the little children can say “Our Father” with understanding. It was a felicitous image which suddenly appropriated for theology the analogies of love and the associations of home; which teaches us to argue with irresistible force what my

father on earth would not do because it is evil my Father in heaven will not do; what my father here will do of good, that and more my Father above will do. Granted that this is anthropomorphic reasoning, how else can we argue than from the best in us to the better in God? Granted that this analogy is faint, that only invests it with more winsome attraction. What an astounding *gaucherie* it has been to state the intimate relation between God and the soul in the language of criminal law, with bars, prisoners, sentences. This terminology has two enormous disadvantages. It is unintelligible to any one who is not a criminal or a lawyer; it is repulsive to any one who desires to love God. Take it at the highest, it was the spirit of Moses. Without disparagement to a former dispensation, it has been superseded by the spirit of Jesus.

One is not astonished that some of Jesus' deepest sayings are still unfathomed, or that some of His widest principles are not yet applied. Jesus is the Eternal Son, and the ages overtake Him slowly. One is aghast to discover that the doctrine which Jesus put in the forefront of His teaching and laboured with such earnestness did not leave a trace on the dominant theology of the early Church, and for long centuries passed out of the Christian consciousness. Had it not been for the Lord's Prayer and, in a sense, the three Creeds, no witness had been left for the Fatherhood in Christian doctrine and worship. The Anglican communion has thirty-nine articles, with one on oaths, one on the descent into hell, one on the marriage of priests, one on how to avoid people that are excommunicate, and not one on the Fatherhood. The Presbyterian communion has a confession with thirty-three chapters, which deal in a trenchant manner with great mysteries, but there is not one expounding the Fatherhood of God. It was quite allowable that theology should formulate doctrines on subjects Jesus never mentioned, such as original sin; and elaborate

theories on facts Jesus left in their simplicity, such as His sacrifice. These speculations are the function of that science, but it is inexcusable that the central theme of Jesus' teaching should have been ignored or minimised. This silence, from the date of the Greek fathers to the arrival of the modern Broad Churchman, has been more than an omission; it has been a heresy.

It is an endless consolation that our Master's words are indestructible and eternal. Certain ideas of Jesus disappeared, and seemed to have died; they were not dead, they were only sown. When their due time came they awoke to life, and it is now spring-time with the Fatherhood. The disciples of Jesus owe a debt that can never be paid to three men that have brought us back to the mind of our Master. One was Channing, for whose love to Jesus one might be tempted to barter his belief; the second was Maurice, most honest and conscientious of theologians; and the third was Erskine of Linlathen, who preached the Fatherhood to every one he met, from Thomas Carlyle to highland shepherds. This sublime truth received at first the same treatment from the nineteenth century as from the first. Its inherent grace has not been an immediate commendation; its utter reasonableness has been an indirect provocation. But the Spirit of Jesus has been working in men age after age, and it is now evident that the name for God that lay in Jesus' heart is to be acclimatised in the Christian consciousness.

Two persons hesitate to accept the Fatherhood in its fulness who are neither biassed by spiritual pride nor are disloyal to Jesus. With one it is an ethical difficulty, that stands in the way; he has a rooted suspicion that the assertion of God's Fatherhood means the denial of His authority, and that we shall exchange the Holy One of Israel for a magnified Eli. Certain advocates of Jesus' idea have themselves to blame for this misapprehension,

since they have invested the "Holy Father" of Jesus, whose Name is "hallowed," with a cloud of sickly sentiment, a God too weakly to rule, too soft-hearted to punish. If this conception should obtain, Christianity would deserve to lose her hold on the conscience, and morality would have to fight for very existence. Jesus is not responsible for this helpless Deity, this pitiable descent from the God of the prophets. With Jesus the Father was Lord of heaven and earth, who "seeth in secret," and holds the times in His hand, who has not only prepared the "many mansions," but also the cleansing fires of Gehenna. No judge is so omniscient as a father, no despot so absolute. The Father of the Sermon on the Mount is not less awful than the God of the Ten Words, nor is the conscience of St. John less strenuous than the conscience of Moses.

The second objection is practical, and carries much force, for it simply comes to this, that experience is a denial of the Fatherhood. One admires the Galilean dreamer with His Father-God, and His charming illustrations of the lilies and the birds, but this is an idyll, and life is real. What signs of paternal government can be found in the martyrdom of man from the first days of history to the last war, in the hideous sufferings of slavery or in the equal miseries of great cities? With such a record before one it is certainly open to argue that Jesus was too optimistic. Granted, but that does not close the question. With the record of His own life before one, it is not open to conclude Jesus was wrong. He drank the bitterest cup; He suffered the shamefullest death, and yet reconciled the incalculable tragedy of His life with the love of His Father. Jesus did not regard suffering as the contradiction of love; it was one of its methods. When Jesus said Father on the Cross, it may have been a pathetic delusion, but it was the delusion of Him who knew God best of the Race.

One joyfully anticipates the place this final idea of God

will have in the new theology. Criticism has cleared the ground and gathered its building materials. A certain conception of God must be the foundation and give shape to the whole structure. No one can seriously doubt that it will be the Fatherhood, and that Jesus' dearest thought will dominate theology. No doctrine of the former theology will be lost; all will be recarved and refaced to suit the new architecture. Sovereignty will remain, not that of a despot, but of a father; the Incarnation will not be an expedient, but a consummation; the Sacrifice will not be a satisfaction, but a reconciliation; the end of Grace will not be standing, but character; the object of punishment will not be retribution, but regeneration. Mercy and justice will no longer be antinomies; they will be aspects of Love, and the principle of human probation will be exchanged for the principle of human education.

One sees already the place which the Fatherhood will have in the new life into which the race in every land is entering. While piety imagined God as the Father of a few and the Judge of the rest, humanity was belittled and Pharisaism reigned: slavery was defended from the Bible, and missions were counted an impertinence. When He is recognised as the universal Father, and the outcasts of Humanity as His prodigal children, every effort of love will be stimulated, and the Kingdom of God will advance by leaps and bounds. As this sublime truth is believed, national animosities, social divisions, religious hatreds and inhuman doctrines will disappear. No class will regard itself as favoured: no class will feel itself rejected, for all men everywhere will be embraced in the mission of Jesus and the love of the Father.

JOHN WATSON.