

Focus On The Father

by Staff

Forerunner, June 1994

Why are we in God's church? Is it not because Someone requested our presence in the church by personally calling us out of this present world (John 6:44)? This Someone asks us to address Him, not as "Lord of heaven and earth," "Supreme Commander of the heavenly hosts" or any other such magnificent title which may indeed describe Him, but simply as "Father" (Matthew 6:9).

God the Father knows very well that our concept of Him determines our individual conduct and rate of spiritual growth toward the maturity He eventually expects of His children. Therefore, we can safely assume that He has done everything within His great wisdom and power to ensure that each called one who responds to Him eventually comes to understand just how wonderful a father He really is. Maybe more importantly, we also learn how a child of such a wonderful father must behave.

We need to reflect on our own life and calling to see just *how* our Father in heaven brings us into His Family. And keep in mind that He knew how to accomplish this tremendous feat long before we were born.

Our Human Fathers

He started out by having us born into human families with all their human frailties. Gradually, we grew up in the environment Mom and Dad provided for us. Probably before we began attending school, Dad administered that first memorable, disciplinary spanking, and he suddenly began to register in our conscience as a "father figure," the one who had the last word in the family. Unfortunately, by the time we were teens, many of us began to reject our parents, especially our fathers, because, chances are, they were "harder" on us.

Not only did most fathers not perform to either God's or our expectations, but some of them may have died early because of mankind's violent ways of life. Others abandoned their wives and children for various reasons. Today, we see this happening at an alarming rate at all levels of society.

God knew circumstances like these would occur because mankind has a history of this on the earth, and He has seen it all. Down through history, many fathers have failed their children, and most likely, the majority of them were not the educators and examples they should have been. The proper concept of what the Father in heaven is like was not put into their children's minds and hearts. But God, in His wisdom and foresight, provided for that as well.

How? The right kind of father makes sure that his children are reared and educated properly. He never leaves such a vital matter to chance, and he will never desert them. To that end, the Father in heaven called us into His church, and in His absence assigned to us "church fathers" whom He entrusted with our care until we are able to see Him face-to-face (I John 3:2).

He is not really absent from our lives, but He is in heaven and we are on earth. He sees us, cares for us and is involved in our lives even though we cannot see Him with our eyes. It is not that He is too busy with other things to attend to us personally, but He has determined that it is best for us at this time to talk to Him from a distance, until we are prepared for closer contact.

"Substitute" or "surrogate" father does not sound very endearing. More fitting terms may be "tutor" or "mentor." In former times, a king would hire a highly qualified servant to give private lessons to a young prince—an educational system superior to public schools. Such tutors were selected by the king to ensure that the little prince would grow up properly educated to serve his people as his heir.

The church fathers God has selected for us function just like that in our Father's overall plan of childrearing. We could call them our "parents in the Lord." In Ephesians 6:1 Paul writes, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right," adding something to the general fifth commandment, "Honor your father and mother" (verse 2). Our "parents in the Lord" are those who were converted to God before we were and who taught us the truth. In the spirit of the teaching, they may or may not have been our natural parents.

Neither are the church fathers all dead. When the Father appointed the apostle Paul to just such a position, Paul was alive. We should not get the idea that our fathers can only be honored after they have been canonized, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and others whose names are mentioned in the Bible. The apostle Paul, while alive, considered himself to be one of the true church fathers. "I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel" (I Corinthians 4:14-15).

In the next verse he exhorts, "That is why I implore you to follow the footsteps of me your father" (verse 16, J. B. Phillips translation). Was Paul the biological father of Timothy (verse 17), or was he a father to him in the gospel, just as Herbert W. Armstrong is to so many of us? "Directly or indirectly you brethren are all my children in the Lord," wrote Mr. Armstrong in the June 16, 1980 *Worldwide News*.

Paul does not say that he was their only father, for in saying "you do not have many fathers," he acknowledges that the brethren also had other fathers. For instance, he informs us that Abraham is "the father of all those who believe . . . who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had" (Romans 4:11-12). Long before, through the prophet Isaiah, God encourages us to "look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you" (Isaiah 51:2).

Of course, Jesus Himself is one of our church fathers, as it was He who established and builds the church. He functions in this role in tandem with demonstrating to us how a perfect son ought to live. In His living example, He embodies the character and personality of the kind of child who will enjoy eternal life with our Father.

Sent With a Message

The Word of God, made flesh in Jesus Christ, revealed to us His Father in heaven, the One who had sent Him to mankind with a message. The Father entrusted to Him the job of delivering that message to those whom the Father calls or draws.

We should not be surprised, then, to find the true gospel message focused on the Father and His purpose. Jesus was Himself very focused on His Father. He did not tell us to pray to Him, but rather to pray to "Our Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9). He always deferred to His Father and gave Him the credit for His works (John 5:19, 30, 36; 7:16; 12:49).

There is a false gospel which preaches, "Jesus cares for you. Make Jesus the center of your life!" It appeals to the selfish desire of getting saved. As Herbert Armstrong said, we may want to get saved from certain death, but what are we getting saved *for*? For what purpose is your life being preserved? The answer: *to live with the Father!*

Make no mistake, Jesus does care for us. But that is not the message He was commissioned to bring from His Father. The good news message He brought is this: God the Father cares for you so much that He sent Jesus to reconcile you to the Father and to reveal Him to you, so that you can learn to live eternally with your heavenly Father some day. This is the true message of John 3:16-21.

His life and death show how much Jesus cares for us. But it is the Father who determines when we should be called and when we should become His children! Jesus plainly says, "Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me" (John 6:45).

This message, Mr. Armstrong said, was not preached to the world for nineteen hundred years. Subverted by the false trinity doctrine, the true gospel was replaced with another gospel that ignores the real, involved Father, emphasizing the caring Messenger instead.

We cannot deny history. In speaking of true and false servants, Jesus gives us a simple formula: "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16). Herbert W. Armstrong alone came with the true gospel of the Kingdom of God in this end time. Only he, of all the people claiming to preach the gospel, put the doctrines and the purpose of God together in an understandable and accurate way. And God used him mightily to reach thousands of people around the world with His gospel. Without a doubt, he is one of our church fathers.

God has provided us with a pastor who watches over us like a father over children. Christ has prepared him through experience in the ministry spread over a number of decades. He has shown fruits of the ability to educate God's people as He wants done.

Concern for the Family

All true church fathers, placed in the church by our Father in heaven, seem to have one special characteristic in common: They accept and display a strong sense of responsibility for both the physical and spiritual welfare of others outside their own immediate families. This concern for the entire family, as a whole and in part, is a trait that they share with our Father.

Even when scattered, the children are not left leaderless orphans by their Father. Far too much is at stake to leave the upbringing of godly sons to chance. And if we have lost a father early in life, or if one has failed us in one way or another, we can have faith in Jesus' promise that we will "receive many times more in this present time" (Luke 18:29-30). God will present us with more than just one good example of a father in whose footsteps we can walk.

Until we see Him face to face, it is our responsibility individually to *accept* those fathers which our Father in heaven appoints and gives to us. We need to read the letters of our surrogate fathers, recorded for our benefit in the Bible, and take their messages to heart.

Jesus says that except we become as little children, we shall not enter the Family of His Father (Luke 18:17). In the role of a church father, He said: "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid

them; for of such is the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14). His Father's Family will be composed of sons and daughters who have teachable and humble attitudes. Notice, these little children come! Children gladly run to a loving Father.

Children need their parents, even when the children think they do not. God provides the structure of the family so that those needs are met, and His own Family works the same way. Children, do not cut yourselves off from Dad and Mom—you need them more than you understand. The Father in heaven has ordained it to be that way. And parents, do not cut yourselves off from your fathers in the Lord—you and I need them also.

All the church fathers, dead and alive, were handpicked and placed (I Corinthians 12:18, 28) by our all-wise and all-seeing God to be instrumental in preparing the rest of us for happy, productive and exciting life forever with Him. As they correctly perform their appointed duties within the church, we will draw closer to our ultimate and loving Father in heaven.