

Unit 4: God the Father

References to God as Father, even if rare, can be found in the Old Testament. God is referred to there as the Father of the nation of Israel (Deut. 32:6; Isa. 63:16; 64:8; Jeremiah 3:4; 3:19; 31:9; Mal. 1:6; 2:10). At other points, God is seen as the Father of certain individuals (2 Sam. 7:14; 1 Chron. 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Psalm 68:5; 89:26), while the imagery of Fatherhood is also employed without drawing the conclusion that God is 'Father' (Exod. 4:22-23; Deut 1:31; 8:5; 14:1; Psalm 103:13; Jer. 3:22; 31:20; Hosea 11:1-4; Mal. 3:17). However, it is unlikely that this use of 'Father' as a metaphor by which the early biblical authors could refer to the God of Israel, played anything but a minor part in the formulation of the Doctrine of the Trinity which, as we will see, is dependent on understanding Jesus as 'Son'.

Nevertheless, the Old Testament confirms the basic 'inaccessibility' of God. 'The biblical God,' says Jan Milič Lochman, 'cannot be grasped through intellectual efforts any more than through the devices of cult or magic'. For Lochman, this is confirmed in God's 'first words of command' where no images can be made to represent God, for he 'is who he is' or 'he will be who he will be' (Exod. 3:14). Thus 'his essence is not that of a necessary concept but his own free revelation – in biblical terms, his covenant, his salvation, his history. But all this means that he is the God who is not self-evident'.¹ God's self-revelation is thus historical in which his nature is revealed through his actions with, and for, his creation. This has implications for the Doctrine of the Trinity. The Doctrine is based on the experience of God in his self-revelation in Christ and continued by the Spirit in the Church. The Trinity is no 'necessary concept', but a matter of his God has dealt with human beings and how they, in turn, have experienced him in and through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Thus, technically, the *economic* Trinity (how we see God to have acted as Trinity) corresponds to the *immanent* Trinity (how God really is). God the Father, then, cannot be understood apart from his self-revelation, nor can the appellation be fully understood apart from an understanding of the Doctrine of the Trinity.

Clearly it is Jesus' teaching about God as Father, rather than any precedent found in the Old Testament, which is most significant for Christian theology. It was Jesus' primary term for addressing God (around 65 times in the Synoptic Gospels and 100 times in the Fourth Gospel). The term Jesus used, 'Abba' is noted for its intimacy and Jesus instructed his followers to use the term, as in the Lord's Prayer. For Jesus, 'Father' is *vocative* not *nominative*; it is a term of address. As Karl Barth noted: 'seriously, properly and strictly Christians cannot speak *about*

¹ Jan Milič Lochman, *The Faith We Confess: An Ecumenical Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985), p. 46.

the Father but only *to him*'.² Thus reference to God as 'Father' 'is not general history and the philosophy of religion, rather it is specifically biblical history, above all the history of Jesus of Nazareth'.³ In calling God 'Father', Jesus gave the name 'a distinctive point or turn' and the gospels demonstrate that it is intended to emphasize a 'special and almost tender nearness ... a relation of love and trust'. As a result, 'the patriarchal and authoritarian elements that are often associated with the word are in the background'.⁴ Indeed, God's Fatherhood is not to be seen in light of human fatherhood and, due to its revelation in the Son, in fact it only relates analogically to human fatherhood in the way in which it displays self-giving and self-sacrificing love as the key to living in relationship with others. Such an analogy of living-in-relation can only be imperfectly applied to human relationships because its fundamental purpose is the living-in-relation of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Doctrine of the Trinity, then, is based on the idea that Christ's relationship to the Father as 'Son' is different from the relationship of other human beings to God. He was Son 'by nature', while they were sons 'by adoption' (to use a Pauline distinction). Thus in the Pauline letters, God's fatherhood is understood not in terms of his creation of all, but in the redemption and reconciliation achieved in Christ. Thus Paul refers to 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; 11:31). It is through Christ that other human beings are able not only to call God Father, but to share in the Father/Son relationship through adoption and rebirth by the Holy Spirit. Grace and peace have come through Jesus Christ and in him human beings become God's children (Rom. 8:12-16; 1 Peter 1:3-4; 1 John 3:1). In this way 'being a child of God is not, then, a common, ontologically given quality or *habitus* of the human race. It has a concrete basis in the incarnate Son'.⁵ In Trinitarian shorthand, because Jesus is the Son of God, incorporation into Christ by the Holy Spirit makes his followers adopted 'sons' of the Father. It follows, then, that 'it is proper to deduce the meaning of Father' from 'the life and praxis of Jesus of Nazareth' which, in turn, 'is only known within the matrix of the God already revealed in the covenant with Israel'.⁶ As Lochman puts it:

Jesus Christ is 'Immanuel' – God with us, the God who is really close, but

² Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV/4: Lecture Fragments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 51; Jan Milič Lochman, *The Lord's Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 16-17.

³ Lochman, *The Faith We Confess*, p. 48.

⁴ Lochman, *The Lord's Prayer*, pp. 18-19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶ Ralph Del Colle, 'The Triune God', in Colin E. Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 125.

now in the profoundest, most binding, and really unconditional sense – that of his incarnation, his identification with sons and daughters in life and in death, for all eternity. Here is God not only in the majesty and height of his heavenly life but also in the depths of his earthly life and destiny.⁷

This God is confessed by Jesus himself, and by those who believe in him, to be ‘Father’.

As God is made known through his historical activity, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is also the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. This God achieves his purposes in the world through the Son and the Spirit, the Spirit relating human beings to the Father through the Son. Jesus is God’s self-manifestation and, if Christian theology turns away from that basic premise, then the result is the construction of an idol rather than reflection about God. As a result, ‘any identification of God apart from Jesus of Nazareth is in danger of becoming an abstraction’. However, any absolute identification of Jesus with God detracts from his proper humanity.⁸ As a result, ‘The New Testament makes it quite clear that Jesus is not simply God, but also who he is in relation to God – God the Father. His Father is not only the one to whom he prayed, but the one to whom he was, by the Holy Spirit, related in such a way that he became, humanly, that which he was called to be’.⁹ Again, ‘as far as Christian faith was concerned, in the ministry of Jesus it was God himself who “came to expression”. It became impossible for the church to think of God without Jesus, and without the Spirit who is at work in and among Christians, or, conversely, to think of Jesus and the Spirit without God’.¹⁰

From the perspective of Trinitarian theology, it is important to see God’s Fatherhood primarily in terms of Christ’s sonship. The key verse is ‘No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him’ (Lk 10.22; Math. 11:27). While it might be natural to assume that God the Father, as the one who sends both Son and Spirit into the world, is in some ways first in precedence and the Son and Spirit are subordinate to him, this verse suggests that God’s Fatherhood and Sonship are in fact interdependent. Neither can be understood in distinction from the other, despite the fact that God’s Fatherhood ‘clearly derives from the prayer practice and “Abba Experience” of Jesus’.¹¹ There is thus what Colin

⁷ Lochman, *The Faith We Confess*, pp. 50-51.

⁸ Colin E. Gunton, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), pp. 26-27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁰ Lochman, *The Faith We Confess*, p. 47.

¹¹ Del Colle, ‘The Triune God’, p. 124.

Gunton called an 'economic subordination', which does not include 'ontological subordination' (a doctrine which had been condemned at the ecumenical councils of the church). The Son obeys the Father, does the Father's work, and will hand over the Kingdom to the Father. In other words, the Son (and the Spirit) mediate the Father's work. But this does not compromise the *divinity* of either the Son or the Spirit.

The creeds of the early church confirm, in their first clause, that belief in God the Father is the first claim of faith. The Apostles' Creed begins: 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth'. The Nicene Creed (325) begins 'We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things, visible and invisible'. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) begins: 'We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible'.

As with other characteristics of God's Fatherhood, the 'Father Almighty' is to be understood in terms of his self-revelation in Christ. Lochman, following Barth, calls this 'the Christological dimension of the divine omnipotence'. In doing so, 'omnipotence' is clarified in terms of the power of justice and the power of God's free love in Christ. As Karl Barth put it (writing at the height of Nazi totalitarianism):

Where 'power in itself' is honoured and worshipped, where 'power in itself' wants to be the authority and to impose its law, we are confronted with the revolution of Nihilism ... From the very beginning, God's power is the power of justice ... This power of God is the power of his free love in Jesus Christ.¹²

The association of 'father' with 'almighty', even when associated with 'the power of [God's] free love in Jesus Christ, has to be seen in light or otherwise of the existence of suffering in the world. Jürgen Moltmann has emphasized God's righteousness in the face of evil in the world and God's presence in the midst of the world's suffering. Centring his theology on the cross, he offers a profoundly incarnational and Trinitarian view which leads to the conclusion that God suffers alongside those who suffer, as God experienced suffering and in some ways death, in the death of Jesus, the incarnate Son of God. Moltmann's theology of the God who is alongside his people, as a fellow-sufferer, has much to commend it. It proposes a Trinitarianism of non-hierarchical relationships within the Godhead which in turn enters into solidarity and relationship to humankind. He steadfastly refuses to offer any explanation of suffering, referring instead to the unreasonable and irrational nature of sin. The cross points not to a solution to

¹² Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (London: SCM, 1949), pp. 48f.

suffering but overturns 'the suffering of suffering' which is the absence of love, hope and freedom. More than anything, Molmann's theology proposes God as passive, one who receives from and suffers with the creation, and not simply as one who is active in leading the creation to consummation and redeeming the vicissitudes and suffering found in life.¹³ At best this is a self-imposed restriction on the sense of absolute almightiness, with the concept itself redefined as absolute freedom to love to the extreme sacrifice.

The view of God as co-sufferer is an affirmation of God's immanence in the world. As such it is *an* explanation of God's 'Fatherhood' but it is also, in part, a denial of God's *almightiness*. This leads, at least in some quarters, to the discomfort that 'we [do not] have good news to offer if the most we can say is that in the Son God is suffering too'.¹⁴ This leads to the conclusion that in the Father, God's power is revealed but not simply as a more powerful 'creature' than any other known to us. Instead, we look to the inherent dynamism within God which effects and empowers creation. The God who says 'I am who I am' is not absolute being, or creature of power, but the God who is present with his people in an effective way. For Janet Soskice, this 'power' is seen in Jesus' passion, a word to conjure both the sense of suffering and the sense of 'letting be', of divine passivity. Instead of a power which tinkers in a causal way in creation, she advocates the sense of God's power as 'holding of the whole in being, in overwhelming, all-giving love. True omnipotence eternally suffers, that is allows, the world to be in its own dependent autonomy'. It is not, then, in controlling life that God's almightiness is revealed, but in God's giving of life and 'letting be'.¹⁵

The Fatherhood of God became a prominent category in late nineteenth century theological liberalism. This explication of God's Fatherhood was moralistic and ethical rather than traditionally Trinitarian and rather than revolve around the specific self-revelation of God in Christ it posited a kind of essentialist accessibility, an immediacy of relationship between the divine creator and his human creation, which is reflected in but not mediated by Jesus. Thus the influential theologian, Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) rejected metaphysics and interpreted Jesus in terms of his 'value' for human beings. Drawing on Kantian philosophy, he concluded that the Kingdom of Heaven represented a form of human organization which was instituted by the moral action of human beings, based primarily on the imperative to love. Adolf Harnack (1851-1930), a pupil of Ritschl, sought to separate the 'kernel' of Christian teaching from the 'husk' of

¹³ See Richard Bauckham, 'Jürgen Moltmann', in David F. Ford (ed.), *The Modern theologians* (2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 224.

¹⁴ See Alan P. F. Sell, *Conservation and Exploration in Christian Theology* (Caernarfon: Gwasg pantycelyn, 1993), p. 16.

¹⁵ Janet Martin Soskice, 'God of Power and Might', in *The Month* (November 1988), pp. 937-8.

philosophical and metaphysical accretions which had been added to that teaching over the centuries. He identified a three-fold 'kernel', namely: (1) the Kingdom of God and its coming; (2) the Fatherhood of God and the concomitant Brotherhood of Man; (3) the command to love and to live according to the higher ethic.¹⁶ During the early twentieth century, these three points became the central concerns of theological liberalism.

The idea of God's Fatherhood, as espoused by the nineteenth century Liberals, reflects both the transcendence and immanence of God. God as Father (parent) transcends human beings who are to be seen as 'children' and thus different from God. Yet in the same way as the parent is close, God the Father is close to his children. In seeing 'the brotherhood of man' as a consequence of God's Fatherhood (with brotherhood, at the time, not intended as excluding women), then the concept is seen to have a social consequence. If God is Father, then all are related, through him, as children. Initially, this sense of 'brotherhood' was used to challenge the inequalities of industrial society and was a central component of the Social Gospel as expressed, among others, by Walter Rauschenbusch. In working itself out in terms of the quest to live out the rule (*basileia*) of God, characterized by love of neighbour, such thinking poses theological and practical challenges to the threat of intolerance, nationalism, racism, sexism, poverty and injustice.

¹⁶ Adolf Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1901).