

CHAPTER 6

FATHERS AND SONS



Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

—Malachi 4:5–6

I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn *you*. For though *ye* have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet *have ye* not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.

—1 Corinthians 4:14–15

Over the last fifteen or twenty years much has been taught and written concerning spiritual fathers and spiritual sons.¹ Teaching within the apostolic renewal regularly refers to apostles as spiritual fathers (as well as other metaphors) and those under their covering as sons. The father-son relationship is allegedly the model from which leaders conduct effective ministry and the way to build local churches according to God's prescribed order. Governmental alignment to a covering apostolic father is presented as the prerequisite to divine blessing and

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unity under a singular (fathering) head who provides ministry cohesion and direction. It is alleged by many that only a single executive head can provide the necessary unity for corporate purpose and failure at this point is risky:

Folks, when we mess with God's established order, we miss God's enormous blessings.²

Don Rumble points out the spiritual weakness of this view:

Unity then can only be conceived of as attainable through organizational methods. The key words become "compromise" and "submission." Such an approach to unity requires men to *compromise* in order to find the middle ground that all can stand on, even if it means agreeing to things some consider wrong. It also demands that people submit to the plans of the one(s) in the leading position(s) of the association, Unity then is seen as the accomplishing of stated goals within a peaceful atmosphere.

However, unity in the biblical sense is the revelation of the nature of God through a diverse people (Jn. 17:11, Ephesians 4:16). Organizational methods will never achieve the miracle of "bodyness" (many different people with distinct giftings moving as one under the headship of Christ). Real unity is miraculous and requires the glory of God. (Jn. 17:21-23).³

Surely, father-son language and imagery saturates the Scripture. God identifies himself generationally as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: fathers and sons. God sent a Son. The answer to humanity's need is not a thing, or a how to, or a what, but a who—a Son. In Romans 7, Paul cried out for deliverance, not asking for an explanation or a precept, but a deliverer—a Who. The creation longs and waits, not for an answer, but for whom: sons to be manifest.⁴ One of the great glories of the New Covenant is the filial relationship the believer has not just with "God," but with the Father. In His ascension, glorification and Spirit outpour-

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ing, Jesus accomplished a cosmic relational change: His Father became ours.⁵ Inheritance is an unavoidable theme of Scripture. However, if the devil cannot get us to overtly sin and fail God, he will take God's own beautiful precepts and twist them slightly or push them beyond divine limits, where a God-concept becomes corrupted.

I am afraid this is the case with father-son teaching. The horse of apostolic fathering has been feeling its oats. It does not belong in the glue factory but back in the corral, and bridled, so folks can enjoy the ride without getting thrown off. Broken bodies currently litter the apostolic corral. A scripturally legitimate motif has exceeded divine limits, becoming deceptive, abusive, and corrupt. It must be reigned in. Effective ministry and strong churches are not built by aligning them to spiritual fathers in a new apostolic order of government but by teaching them to plumb the depths of the Person, Christ Jesus: the Sure Foundation.

Call No Man Father

Within apostolic circles it is common to hear language such as:

- "I am one of so and so's spiritual sons."
- "So and so is my spiritual father/mother."
- "He/she is one of my sons/daughters."
- "I provide fatherly covering for my spiritual sons and daughters."
- "My pastor is my spiritual father."
- "I am the apostolic father to my network."

Those who make a practice of using this language and functioning in the relationships related to this language have not given serious consideration to the implications of Matthew 23:8–12 (emphasis mine):

But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and *all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth*: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one

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is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.

Protestants cavalierly dismiss this admonition as having no personal application. The Roman priesthood is too big a target for Protestant arrows to miss. Unfortunately, the Roman speck obscures the Protestant log. The emphasis on honoring leadership⁶ and using honor titles⁷ in apostolic circles does not take second fiddle to any Roman practice. In spirit, it is not an iota different than any Roman custom, and in practice the level of veneration and honor ascribed to “spiritual fathers” in the apostolic movement would make a cardinal turn redder than his cape with embarrassment. The rationale used for honor titles is “it teaches the people honor and respect.” Maybe, maybe not.

There is nothing wrong with giving honor to whom honor is due as long as it is in a *community of mutuality*, where the *least honorable are given the greater honor!*⁸ We are to honor every one,⁹ not just the pastor of the church or the apostle of the network. In thirty years of church experience in various local church environments and diverse theological backgrounds, I received copious teaching on 1 Timothy 5:17 (giving double honor to leaders: e.g. pastors, apostles, etc.). Yet, at the same time, I have never heard a single practical message preached on 1 Corinthians 12:23–25 (honoring the least honorable), nor seen regular policies and protocols of honor implemented to emphasize those verses with the same sense of conviction with which honor of leaders is preached.

I would like to put out a simple challenge to the church leader who might be irritated with me while reading this: Who gets the best seating in your church? Who gets the best parking space? Who gets special days of appreciation in their honor? Who has the finest office? Who has access to the VIP snack room after service? The dear saint who quietly takes care of his/her invalid mother everyday without fanfare? Or the glow-in-the dark apostle/bishop who is in for a weekend’s worth of meetings? Uh, Houston . . . we have a problem. When honor flows in

one direction—upstream—to hierarchy, position, ministry, office, and rank, we are on ungodly ground, even with 1 Timothy 5:17 hanging on our lips.

The Matthew 23:8–12 passage is clearly a divine ban. The King James Version *ye* in verse 8 is emphatic.¹⁰ In modern street English, it could be rendered: “*Listen up, I am talking to you . . . this means you!*” The implication of these verses goes beyond a generic ban on using inflated titles of honor, or false prestige, though these are undoubtedly included. Jesus specifically mentions three distinct classes, or categories, in His ban: Rabbi, father, and master. Why would the Lord mention these three? What would these titles or terms have in common, beyond being generally honorific, that the Lord would so group them? We need to understand some cultural background.

Rabbi

A full examination of the role of the rabbis in first-century Judaism is beyond the scope of this writing. However, one element has bearing on this topic. The rabbis believed that, as teachers of Torah to the people, they were the guides into, or the brokers of, eternal life to Israel.¹¹ They believed they had power, through their teaching of the Torah, to give or withhold access to eternity. Christ refers to this in verse 13 when He describes the Pharisees and scribes “shutting up heaven” to their followers. *Abba*¹² (father) was also a term applied to and desired by the rabbis. In their culture, leading or guiding someone made you metaphorically their master; hence, Jesus uses the term almost synonymously with rabbi.

Father

Naturally speaking, a father is someone without whom you would not have literal, physical existence. A father is responsible (with obvious partnering help!), not for bringing life to you, but in a sense, bringing you to life. He is the agent, or broker, of your physical existence. Without him (parents), you could not experience physical life.

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Master

First-century Palestine was a patronage culture, not an individual merit culture. To advance in society, or at times to even have access to the essentials of life, it was necessary to develop relationship with a rich patron who could assure you of access to monetary resources, or favor. You could not categorically advance in their society through hard work and self-effort. That is a thoroughly Western, primarily American, value (one of our better ones, though not without weaknesses!). This notion simply did not exist in their culture. You got ahead in life by honor status at birth or by the community granting you honor, not by your own personal merits. In exchange for a patron's favor, the beneficiary was responsible to extol the patron's virtues in the community. The recipient of the patron's favor would often walk behind the patron in public, vocally expressing how wonderful the patron was.¹³ Without a sponsoring patron (who would in effect be one's master), the basics of life sustenance often were not accessible. The patron/master was literally responsible for life or death.

What do these three categories have in common and how does it relate to our topic? The members of each group were (literally, figuratively, or spiritually) *brokers of life*. Jesus forbids, not only the use of honorific titles, but at a deeper level, He is saying there is only one life-broker: God/Christ. The modern English word "lord" derives from the old English word "*hlafweard*" meaning, "he who guards the loaf." For millennia, bread has been considered the staff of life. The ancients understood that he who guarded the loaf, was responsible for your life, and was therefore, your *hlafweard* or "lord."

In a kingdom context, there is only one life-brokering Lord, and it is not a covering apostle! We are all equal brethren before the only true Life-broker and Grantor of favor. The only broker of life and blessing to the believer is Christ Himself, *not* a covering spiritual father or apostle. We can all receive blessing from one another, through the diverse giftings and ministries distributed in the body. However, limiting the power

to bless to a vested individual in a certain office, or viewing spiritual fathering in a covering and life-brokering capacity is error.

Sons of the Son

Some teach that the prototype model for the relationship between pastor and congregant or apostle and subordinate ministry is the spiritual father-son paradigm. An individual's status as a "spiritual son in the house," or lack thereof, often determines access to spiritual development, training, church membership, promotion or release into personal ministry.

I know of situations where ministry or departmental leadership opportunities were denied to individuals because in the leader's eyes they were not "spiritual sons," supposedly not possessing the pastor's heart as a son and therefore not trustworthy. This was especially painful, as over years and decades the people had demonstrated their love and care for the pastor by their loyalty, finances, and service. However, because of a subjectively perceived lack of a nebulous quality of "spiritual sonship," the individuals were marginalized and neutralized for kingdom expression.

This type of situation reverses the Ephesian 4 mandate. The pastor no longer equips the saints for the work of ministry but disqualifies the saints because they do not facilitate the pastor's ministry—the "vision of the house!" The believer's status in relationship to the pastor/apostle becomes the determinative factor as to whether or not he or she is equipped and released into ministry. It was all done with a deeply-set conviction of conformity to God's Word and "present truth," "new-order revelation and understanding." It is sad and it is abuse.

Much sonship teaching requires spiritual sons to prove their loyalty before being released into their own ministry with the father's blessing and leadership sanction. The teaching allegedly models Luke 16:1-13¹⁴ (serving another person's ministry/vision before God gives you your own) and is typically presented as a concern for the ultimate spiritual