

God Our Father

by Scott Hahn

St. Paul stood in the front lines of a religious revolution. He preached a radical proposition. His gospel—his good news—was news indeed.

Even today his message is shocking. And yet we have somehow lost our capacity to be shocked by it.

At the heart of St. Paul's gospel was the revelation of God's fatherhood. By now, after two thousand years of Christian piety, this revelation seems like a worn coin. God's fatherhood is so cliché that everyone assumes it. Right?

Well, no, they don't. God's fatherhood—at least the way Paul understood it—remains a scandal to the world.

Let's take a quick trip back to St. Paul's world, just to recover a bit of the shock value of his message. Let's remember for a moment that the very same message was reason enough to get a man killed. In John's Gospel we learn: "This was why the Jews sought all the more to kill [Jesus], because he . . . called God his Father, making himself equal with God" (Jn. 5:18). It was customary for Jews to call upon God as Father of their nation (see Jn. 8:41), but not as Father to an individual. To make such a claim, they rightly assumed, was in some way to make oneself "equal with God"; for earthly children do share a common nature with their earthly fathers. The shocking truth is that Jesus wanted us share the divine nature of our heavenly Father (see 2 Pet. 1:4). That was a religious bombshell in Jesus' day and age. St. John felt its impact, decades later (see 1 Jn. 3:1), and it still came as a surprise to him!

But, more deeply than anyone, St. Paul explored this revelation theologically, and he employed it daringly.

So he begins his letters to the churches: "Grace to you and peace from God our

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Father" (Rom. 1:7; see also Gal. 1:3, 1 Thess. 1:1, etc.).

It's important that we get this right. For St. Paul, God's fatherhood is not a quaint and homey metaphor. It is, rather, something eternal and metaphysical. He is not saying that God is somehow "like" a father. No, he is saying that God is eternally Father because the Word is His eternal Son (see Phil. 2:6; Gal. 4:4).

It's one thing to say that God is metaphorically "father" to a nation or to the world, because He created both out of nothing. But it's quite another to say that God is eternally "Father" by nature. If God is eternally Father, then there must be an eternal "Child." To a mind trained in monotheism, that seems to imply a threat to God's oneness and transcendence. Indeed, even today, Muslims consider it blasphemy to attribute fatherhood to God.


Yet Paul placed the doctrine of God's fatherhood—and Jesus' eternal sonship—at the very heart of his preaching. It is, for him, a revelation of the Trinity.

And it is still more than that. It is a revelation that we, through Baptism, have somehow come to share in Christ's sonship. St. Paul repeatedly speaks of us as living "in Christ" (see Rom. 8:1). Most famously, he quoted a pagan poet to make his point: "In [God] we live and move and have our being . . . For we are indeed his offspring" (Acts 17:28). He also speaks of Christ as living in us (Gal. 2:20 and elsewhere).

We are sons and daughters in the eternal Son of God. Though Christ had the "form of God" (Phil. 2:6), He poured Himself out

to take on a human "form" (2:7). Why did He do that? So that we might be in Him and He in us. God "destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:5). "For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith" (Gal. 3:26).

This is the truth that theologians call our *divine filiation*. We need to recover that doctrine, surely. But we also need to recover its shock value. I have close friends who remember the day their parents told them they were adopted. Well, St. Paul's letters were inspired by God (see 2 Tim. 3:16), the Father who wants us to know He has adopted us, and who wants us to know the eternal privileges of that adoption.

We are God's children now. What can that mean? St. Paul has something to say about it, and we'll explore that teaching next. 

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