

Topics from the Gospel of John

Part I: The Person of the Father

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The Gospel of John is a unique document. It differs from the Synoptic Gospels in its language, in its structure, and in its approach to the Person of Christ. It differs from the Epistles because it is concerned more with viewing Christ through the glass of personal contact than through His significance in the theology of the church. It is unique in religious literature because it combines a mystical relationship ("Abide in me, and I in you," John 15:4) with a genuine historical framework. The Prologue links the eternal Word, a suprahistorical being, with the manifestation of a historical Person in the flesh (1:14).

Behind this revelation is the concept of God. θεός was a term accepted in the world of the first century for the sovereign of heaven and earth. The Greeks called Zeus "the father of gods and men." The Hebrews spoke of Yahweh: "Hear, O Israel, YHWH our God is one YHWH" (Deut. 6:4). There could be no mistake about the meaning of the word. Furthermore, the theology of the Jews regarded God as a person, whose purpose and will had chosen them to be His people and to become the vehicle for His revelation to the world. The Exodus was the supreme demonstration of His power (Exod. 15:11-13). The Law given at Sinai declared His holiness and His ethical standards for men. The prophets had expressed His love for His people, and His grief over their sins (e.g.,

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Hos. 11:1-8). Nevertheless the revelation was incomplete. He had revealed Himself in historical action and in religious types and symbols, but they were external. How could His love for them be realized in personal experience and how could redemption be more perfectly manifested than through sacrifices which had become perfunctory ritual? Could He be found only in the Temple service, or could He enter the life of the individual? Moses expressed this feeling in his intercessory prayer for a disobedient Israel when he included his own dominating desire: "Show me thy glory" (Exod. 33:18). God refused him, saying: "Thou canst not see my face; for there shall no man see me and live" (33:20). Yet the discontent with an invisible God was not allayed. The second commandment forbade the making of any image to represent God, because presumably no inanimate effigy made by man could adequately represent the living God. He could communicate Himself to man only by a personality that would express perfectly His characteristics, purpose, and mind through the medium of flesh. The incarnation is the answer; for, as John says, "The Word [the expression of God's personality] was made [became] flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The Gospel confirms the statement of Exodus: "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son [or, as the best Greek MSS. read, the only-begotten God], which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared (ἐξηγήσατο) him" (John 1:18).

The revelation of God in Christ depends on a unique relation between God and the Revelator, Jesus, and implies also a new relation between God and man. God is not only the Sovereign of man's destinies, the Judge of man's sin, and the Redeemer of man's estate, but He is also a Father who can be approached personally and who creates a new family by His salvation. The one name for God that Jesus used constantly was "Father." The term predominates in the Gospels, and particularly in John, where it appears 118 times. It was Jesus' title for God; and only once did He ever address Him in any other way. That single instance occurred in the moment of death, when Jesus underwent the agony of alienation that was inevitable in being "made ... sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21). He called the Father "my God" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). Even then, when the moment of agony had passed, Luke records that He said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46) .

THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME

The concept of God as Father originated in the Old Testament. Hosea mentions it with reference to God's concern for Israel: "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt" (Hos. 11:1). Isaiah, speaking for God, says: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear. O earth, for the Lord hath spoken. I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me" (Isa. 1:2). Later in his prophecies he appeals to God for the nation on the same basis: "Thou art our Father, though Abraham be ignorant of us and Israel acknowledge us not: thou, O Lord, art our father, our redeemer; thy Name is from everlasting" (63:16). A closer relationship with the people is presented further along in the text: "But now, O Lord, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter, and we are all the work of thy hand" (64:8). Both of these appeals are for mercy toward the people and the land as viewed collectively. Malachi, in his discussion of the oppression of the poor by the rich, challenged the people by his question: "Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us?" (Mal. 2:10).

Although these texts assert that God is a Father to His people, their emphasis is on His creative purpose rather than on a direct relationship, on concern for them rather than on close and continuing contact with them. The revelation of the fatherhood of God through Christ did not introduce a new concept, but it effected a new contract. Jesus expressed that when He said to Thomas, "No man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). He did not imply that the title was unfamiliar, but that the means of realizing its significance depended on Him.

THE RECOGNITION OF FATHERHOOD

The prologue of John presents the fact that the normal relation between a believer and his God is like the relationship of a son to a father. "But as many as received him, to them gave he power [the right] to become the sons [children] of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:12). The believer is not a follower of a new system, nor a worshipper of a vague and distant deity, nor the subject of a capricious tyrant; instead he is the member of a family. It is normal for him to regard God as a Father who is personally concerned for him and with whom he can communicate freely.

The prayer that Jesus taught to His disciples begins with the salutation, "Our Father," and all its subsequent petitions and im-

plied relations depend on that recognition (Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). Jesus impressed on the disciples that the Father loved them (John 16:23), and when speaking to Mary Magdalene after the resurrection He told her that He would ascend to "my Father and your Father, and my God and your God" (20:17). He regarded this title of "Father" as expressive of the new relationship between the believer and God.

THE REVELATION OF FATHERHOOD

One purpose of this Gospel is to elucidate for the believer what the proper consciousness of the fatherhood involves. The author does this through the demonstration of how Jesus, the perfect Son of God, conducted Himself in a society where many were sons of the devil (8:44). Their nature was revealed by their attitude of unbelief and hatred toward Him. Had they really been sons of God, they could not have taken an attitude of hostility toward Him who more than any other person could rightly be called the Son of God. In what did this sonship consist?

The establishment of this relationship began with a supernatural transformation in response to faith. Those who believed on His name were made sons of God, not by a natural birth, but by a new birth in which the nature of God was implanted in them (3:5). Jesus' parable of the vine (15:1-10) indicates that they become part also of the divine life, drawing on it for their strength and for their fruitbearing. In that context He used the word abide (*μένω*), which implies a close and enduring connection with the source of life. Severance from it means death.

Jesus Himself was born supernaturally, and the language of John 1:13 in its literal rendering may reflect His birth: "Who were born not from bloods [the ancients thought that conception originated in the mingling of the bloods of the parents], nor from biological impulse, nor from a husband's [*ἀνὴρ*] will, but from God." A number of ancient witnesses including OL *b*, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and some others read the singular pronoun "who" while seven Syriac MSS. read the plural pronoun and a singular verb. The resultant reading in the singular would be: "who was born, not of bloods," etc. Although the genuineness of the singular reading is highly improbable, it does reveal that at an early time the spiritual birth of the believer was regarded as analogous to the miraculous birth of Christ. While it may be asserted that the fatherhood of God is universal in the sense that He is the

Creator of all men, the spiritual relationship is established not by physical birth but by a distinctive and supernatural impartation of His nature and life to the believer.

Christ reveals the fatherhood of God not only through His birth but also through His nature. There could be no adequate revelation of God to men unless the mediator of that revelation were able to communicate exactly with both God and men. He must be, to use a modern metaphor, the transformer by which the frequency of the divine message may be brought over into the frequency of human understanding. Nor does this depend wholly on speech; it involves also the total being and life of the mediator. Jesus asserted that He possessed complete experiential knowledge of the Father (*γινώσκειν*). He observed the Father at work (5:17), and cooperated with Him. He was the object of the Father's affection, and consequently was given insight into all that the Father did (5:20). The Father had committed to Him the prerogative of judgment (5:22). The Father had sent Him with full endorsement of His mission and with the honor that such a mission deserved (5:23). Jesus asserted also His unity with the Father: "I and the Father are one" (10:30). Concerning this claim of unity, Stevens says:

When every concession to those who maintain the ethical import of these passages (John 6:46; Matt. 11:27; Luke 10:22) is made, there still remains the capital fact that Jesus makes claims for Himself which would be preposterous in any other.¹

Not only is this unity the ethical unity of purpose and desire, but it implies also a metaphysical unity of nature.

The fact that His enemies so understood His claim is proved, by their attempt to stone Him for blasphemy. Neither did He deny their charge, but rather replied: "Though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know and believe [*γνῶτε καὶ γινώσκητε*, realize and go on to experience] that the Father is in me and I in him" (10:38). He repeated the same statement later in His prayer on the eve of His death (17:21).

Jesus thus definitely claimed to know the Father and to possess the Father's nature. Likewise, Jesus was human. He "became flesh," and His humanity was neither an illusion nor an artificial device. He shared the joys of a wedding (2:1-11) and the sorrows of a funeral (11:1-44); He was thirsty (4:7), troubled by danger (12:27),

¹ G. B. Stevens, *The Johannine Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1894), p. 112.

and fully aware of human obligations (19:26). He did not appear among us as a disguised angel, but as a man.

John thus represents the God-man to whom God was in a peculiar sense His Father. It is noticeable that never in the Gospels does Jesus say "our Father" except when He taught His disciples to pray. When addressing Mary He spoke of "my Father and your Father" (20:17), referring not to two different individuals but to two different relationships. God was His Father from eternity; He becomes our Father by the new birth.

THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF FATHERHOOD

The consciousness of God as His Father is marked strongly in Christ. At the cleansing of the Temple which John describes early in his narrative Jesus expressed His motivation by saying, "Make not my Father's house a house of merchandise" (2:16). He regarded the commercialization of the Temple courts as an insult to His Father, and He resented it deeply. Not only was He scandalized by the impropriety of making a business venture out of worship, but also He felt that the priesthood had dishonored one who was dear to Him. God for Him was not simply an object of religious worship nor a philosophical absolute like Plato's Demiurge or Aristotle's Prime Mover, but a beloved Person whose name and interests He should defend at all costs. He was constantly aware of the Father's love and trust (3:35) and of an intimate partnership with Him (5:17). God was profoundly involved in Jesus' experience (10:15), and the nature of that involvement became the pattern for the relation of His disciples to Him. He was confident that the Father always listened to His petitions and answered them (11:42). In the uncertain fluctuations of His fortunes the Father's presence was His ultimate destination and abiding hope (14:2; 17:24). From the beginning of His ministry to the end, Jesus' fellowship with the Father was the mainspring of His activity and the stabilizing factor in His life.

This consciousness gave Him His sense of mission which was expressed in the formula, "The Father who sent me" (ὁ πέμψας με πατήρ), which is used twenty-three times in the Gospel. The verb ἀποστέλλω, which has much the same meaning, is used concerning Christ seventeen times. The difference between them in the Gospel of John seems to be minimal, though ἀποστέλλω contains a connotation of equipping or commissioning that is generally lacking in πέμπω. These verbs appear most frequently in the passages which describe Jesus' controversy with His enemies. In the

argument with the Jews after the healing of the man at the pool the word *sent* occurs five times (5:24, 30, 36, 37, 38); in the sermon in the Capernaum synagogue, five times (6:29, 38, 39, 40, 44) ; in the debate with the crowd in the Temple, five times (7:16, 18, 28, 29, 33) ; in the controversy over the spiritual ancestry of the Jews, five times (8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42); and in the utterance of Jesus that closed John's account of His public ministry, two times (both in 20:21). His commission was His authority and His defense.

In the First Epistle of John the term is used three times to express the purpose of the Father in sending Jesus: to give men eternal life (4:9) ; to be a propitiation (*ἱλασμόν*) for sin (4:10); and to be the Savior of the world (4:14).

Jesus remarked to His disciples, "My meat [food] is to do the will of him that sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34). He asserted that He could do nothing of Himself, but that He was dependent on the Father both for His direction and for His power (5:19). His final report indicated that He had completed the commission which the Father had given Him (17:4), and in the tension of Gethsemane He reaffirmed His complete obedience: "The cup which the Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" (18:11) Jesus' relation to the Father exemplified completely what the believer's relation was intended to be.

THE ATTITUDE OF THE FATHER

If Jesus' relation with the Father revealed what the nature of the believer's sonship should be, the response of the Father to Him exemplifies also God's attitude toward the believer. He told the woman of Samaria that God was seeking worshippers who would approach Him "in spirit and in truth" (4:24). God is not austere and distant, but welcomes the love and fellowship of His creatures. He draws men to Himself (6:44), and desires that believers should have eternal life (6:40). He answers the prayers of those who approach Him rightly (11:41-42; 15:16; 16:23). The normal relationship is not fear, but love; for Jesus promised the disciples that "If a man love me . . . my Father will love him, and we will come unto him and make our abode with him" (14:23). He confirmed the promise by saying that "the Father himself loveth you" (16:27). In His valedictory prayer He twice stated that the Father loved the disciples whom He was commending to Him (17:23, 26).

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

The full implications of God's fatherhood for the daily life of the disciples are not stated categorically, nor would one expect them to be. If, however, the fatherhood of God is basic to the entire revelation of His person in Christ, the nature of that fatherhood should be apparent in His dealings with men through Christ.

First, as the potential Father of every believer, God is revealing the normal relationship of men to Him. By normal is meant the standard of what the relationship should be, not a consensus of what it is. Jesus told His adversaries that they were descended from their father, the devil, and that they reproduced his nature (8:44). Their obvious opposition to God was evidence that they did not belong to His family, and their rebellion was an abnormality. Jesus was desirous that all should believe on Him and be brought into the family relationship.

This introduction could be accomplished only by the new birth. The confession of faith evinced by baptism and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit would mark the implantation of a new nature that would recognize and respond positively to the person of God the Father. This response involves confidence in God's promises. He becomes the focus of interest and of devotion. He is no longer a distant person whose power and holiness must be acknowledged without any further concern for relationship with Him. He becomes at once an intimate Friend, a personal Counselor, and the gracious Arbiter of life. God is no longer a name or a power, but a Person with whom the believer maintains daily contact.

Such a relationship means that God becomes knowable. Jesus claimed a perfect experiential knowledge of God. He said to the Samaritan woman, "Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews" (4:22). The Samaritans' religion had suffered corruption by an admixture of pagan rites and attitudes at the time of the Exile, and in subsequent times had accepted a syncretism that united their deity with Zeus. In such worship there could be no contact with a personal God. Jesus said also to the recalcitrant Jews, whose worship was not diluted by paganism, "He that sent me is true [real], whom ye know not. But I know him, for I am from him, and he hath sent me" (7:28-29). On another occasion He repeated almost the same words: "Ye neither know me nor my Father: if ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also" (8:19). At the conclusion of this

interview with the Jews He said: "Ye have not known (ἐγνώκατε) him, but I know (οἶδα) him; and if I should say, I know him not (οἶδα), I shall be a liar like unto you: but I know him (οἶδα) and keep his saying [word]" (8:55). Both verbs employed in this context indicate knowledge: οἶδα is generally used of knowledge concerning facts; γινώσκω, of the knowledge which comes from experience. In either case Jesus indicated that not even a factual understanding of God is possible to unbelief.

Jesus' knowledge of the Father involved also a comprehension of the Father's purpose for Him. On the occasion of the Last Supper, when the disciples exhibited a remarkable obtuseness to the significance of the situation, Jesus knew (εἶδως) that His hour had come, and that the Father had committed to Him all responsibility (13: 1, 3). Not only was He aware of impending death, but also He was absolutely confident of His destiny. The contrast between His calmness and the anxiety of the disciples is striking.

An illuminating difference between these two verbs is illustrated in Jesus' reply to Thomas after the latter had said, "Lord, we know (οἶδαμεν) not whither Thou goest; and how can we know (οἶδαμεν) the way?" (14:5) Jesus replied, "If ye had known (ἐγνώκατε) me, ye should have known (ᾔδειτε) my Father also" (14:7). Although the significance of the interchange of verbs in this passage may be argued either way, either that there is a subtle difference or that they are completely synonymous, it is probably better to assume a distinction. Jesus is saying that if the disciples had become fully acquainted with Him by experience, they would have had a correct concept of the nature of the Father.

The sin of men can be attributed to experiential ignorance of God. Jesus, in describing His persecutors, said, "These things will they do unto you, because they have not known (ἐγνώσαν) the Father nor me" (16:3). Sin is not caused simply by intellectual ignorance or bewilderment, but by an alienation of will that precludes acquaintance with the holiness and protection of the Father.

Another corollary of the fatherhood of God is protection. He guards the destinies of the members of His family. John states that when Jesus fell into disfavor with the Jews no man took Him, because "his hour was not yet come" (8:20). On another occasion "they sought him . . . but he escaped out of their hand" (10:39). His life was preserved until His destined work was completed. Jesus' relation with the Father explains His prayer for the disciples: "The world hath hated them, because they are not of the

world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one" (17:14-15). The protection of God does not mean immunity from danger, but it does mean protection from the power of evil and from ultimate disaster.

The fatherhood of God is a motive for life. In explaining the figure of the vine and the branches, Jesus impressed on His disciples that they were obligated to bring forth fruit (15:2, 5). The motive for fruitbearing is the glorification of the Father. The ultimate purpose of all life is to honor the wisdom and power of God, who has created man and placed him in the world for a constructive purpose. To fulfill this purpose is the way to the fullest realization of the fatherhood of God.

The fatherhood of God implies also a destiny. Jesus' parting promise was that He would go to prepare a place for His disciples in the Father's house (14:2-3). He certainly would not prepare a place for those whom He never expected to arrive. Jesus knew that He was going to God via the suffering of the cross (13:1; 17:11), and He was promising to them what He expected on the basis of His knowledge of God's fatherhood (17:24).

SUMMARY

From the beginning of the believer's spiritual life to his final glorification the fatherhood of God is the basis for the believer's experience. It is not surprising that Paul speaks of "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family [every fatherhood, *πατρία*] in heaven and earth is named" (Eph. 3:14-15). This relationship of God to men, perfectly exemplified in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, is both the highest expression of His consciousness of His relation to God and the fullest attainment that man can reach through union with Him. In this way Jesus' prayer reaches its full fruition: "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (John 17:21).

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