

1902

The fatherhood of God as fundamental

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/47641>

Downloaded from DSpace Repository, DSpace Institution's institutional repository

**

The Fatherhood of God
as
Fundamental.

**

E. W. Lutterman.

**

The Fatherhood of God as Fundamental
in Modern Theology.

The sphere of religious faith is a vast one, but its center is God. Accordingly the idea of God is, of necessity, the formative principle in every system of theology. Similar to the conception of the central position of the Sun in our solar system is the idea of God in relation to the moral order: it furnishes the view point from which the facts of the moral universe may be comprehended as a self-consistent whole. Given a man's conception of God, it is possible to determine his doctrine of the world and of man, even as from the primal axioms and postulates we derive the entire science of geometry. Hence the importance, even from a purely theoretical standpoint, of an adequate and worthy conception of Deity. Gaged by practical considerations, one's idea of God appears of even greater moment; for beliefs work themselves out into practice. What a man thinks today he is tomorrow. The best equipment for life is a stock of right fundamental conceptions and convictions.

In this brief essay it is proposed to consider the Christian idea of God and to point out its deterministic character in the Christian system as a whole and more partic-

ularly in two specific connections.

When we consult the New Testament to ascertain what is the idea of God therein contained, we learn that it is that of a Divine Father of men. In the New Testament the name Father is applied to Deity-chiefly by Jesus- two hundred and fifty six times. No other name is used so frequently. The only other often mentioned is God and that, especially when used by Jesus, is largely associated with Father. Matthew and Luke interchange these names, in some instances, in their reports of the same sayings of our Lord.

As might be expected, this name for God occurs most frequently in the gospels. In Matthew it occurs forty three times, seventeen of these being found in the Sermon on the Mount alone. In Mark it occurs four times, in Luke seventeen, while in John the name sparkles on every page, being used altogether one hundred and fourteen times. For three years Jesus wrought and taught to write the name "Father" upon the minds and hearts of his disciples with the result that it has taken its place in human speech as the Christian name for the Divine Being. As Watson has said, "With minute and affectionate care, Jesus described the whole circle of religious thought and stated it in the terms of Fatherhood. Prayer was to be to the Father: say, 'Our Father, which art in heaven.' The principle of life was the will of the Father:

he only attained who had done the will of our Father which is in heaven. The type of character was the Father: 'Be ye, therefore, perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven, is perfect.' Providence is the mindful oversight of the Father: 'Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.' Repentance was a return to the Father: 'I will arise and go to my Father.' One of the few rays Jesus cast on the future showed the Father's dwelling place: 'In my Father's house are many mansions.'"

In the remaining books of the New Testament the references to God as Father are less frequent. This is altogether to be expected since Christ was the center of interest for the apostles. The thought of God was largely overshadowed by the enthusiasm for the Savior. Paul uses the word forty six times, John twenty one times, James three times, Peter four times and Luke, in Acts, three times.

This doctrine of our Lord, like all his other doctrines, was not entirely new. It, too, had its root in the Old Testament literature. Yet it was new in emphasis and in the prominence given it. Christ made the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God shine upon the religious horizon like the noon-day sun. He made luminous God's love and mercy. In the Old Testament, though we find occasional mention of a gentler side of God's nature, on

the whole the impression conveyed is one of austerity and ineffability. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts." God is far removed and difficult of approach. If he is Father at all, it is only to Israel as a whole, the chosen people, or to its earthly sovereign, Jehovah's vicegerent. Israel or Israel's king was God's Son. The prophets never, -with one doubtful exception, Psalm 103; 13- call Jehovah Father of the individual Israelite. Christ, on the other hand, places God in a paternal relation with every individual, Gentile and Jew alike: he is the Father of the human spirit as such. In a sense this doctrine of our Lord, even as thus set forth, is as old as Genesis, though it is certain that Israel ignored it. Yet the man in the image of God in the book of beginnings is the unfallen Adam, the morally clean man, humanity untainted by sin, whereas Jesus thought that God is the Father of all men, sin notwithstanding. He declared this even with reference to the most degraded, publicans and harlots.

At the beginning of his ministry, before delivering the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had occasion to go through Samaria. In conversation with a Samaritan woman of disreputable character he used the title "Father" three times when speaking of God in his relation to men. He said: "Believe me, the hour cometh, and now is, when ye shall neither

in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father. But the hour cometh when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a spirit and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." Here Father is synonymous with God and the name is applied to him in order to mark him out as the common Father, not merely of the Jews and Samaritans, but of the whole human race as well.

Our Lord's doctrine of the universal fatherhood of God is again set forth, more clearly and fully, in the Sermon on the Mount. Here he employs the name Father seventeen times. On this occasion he addressed not the disciples only, but a mixed multitude as well. He said, "your heavenly Father" when addressing them. To say that the words were intended for the disciples only avails nothing in any case. The disciples were not good enough to be the special favorites of the Almighty. There were quite as choice spirits outside the band as in it. James and John who, even after a fellowship of three years with the Master, were to give an exhibition of supreme selfishness in seeking the rich offices of the kingdom; Peter who was to deny him; Judas who was to betray him; and the others who were one and all to forsake him, were not more truly children of the kingdom than many not chosen. The twelve were chosen not because they were especially devoted, but because a small number could be

→ better instructed and trained. What language, moreover, could more explicitly teach that God is the Father of all men than the following: "What man is there of you, who, if his son ask bread, will give him a stone? or, if he ask a fish, will give him a serpent? If ye, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give good gifts to them that ask him?" This passage unquestionably teaches that God is the Father even of the wicked. It is to no purpose to restrict the application of the above words to the disciples. It would brand them equally as evil as the multitude. The difference between the disciples and the multitude can safely be ignored. They were hardly a step in advance either in the understanding of Christ's doctrine or the comprehension of his spirit. The multitude, moreover, certainly considered that the discourse was addressed to them, for at the close they "were astonished at his doctrine, because he taught them as one having authority."

→ There are many other instances of this teaching of our Lord. Thayer, in his Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, gives twenty four references in the gospels in which Jesus speaks of God as the Father of all men. Most incontestable of all is the parable of the Prodigal Son. The Master's design in this parable was to set in sharp contrast his conception of God as Father and the pharisaic con-

ception of God . In the language of Bruce, "God appears as one who takes pleasure in the repentance of sinners, such as the reprobates of Jewish society, because in these penitents he sees prodigal children returning to their Father's house. By these parabolic utterances Jesus said to all, however far from righteousness, God loves you as his children, no more worthy to be called sons, yet regarded as such; He deplores your departure from him and desires your return; and he will receive you graciously when, taught wisdom by misery, you direct your steps homewards. It is not allegorizing exegesis to take this meaning out of the parables. Jesus was on his defence for loving classes of men despised and despaired of and his defence, in part, consisted in this, that his bearing towards the outcasts was that of a divine being. He loved them as a brother; God loved them as a Father."

It would be a futile endeavor to quote in opposition to our contention such a passage as John 8, 42 and 44. Jesus speaking to the pharisees says: "If God were your Father, ye would love me; for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me. Ye are of your father the devil and the lusts of your father ye will do." Jesus has reference here not so much to a relationship sustained by God as he has to an ethical bearing maintained by his auditors. Furthermore, it is not so much the Pharisees whom he combats as it is Pharasaism. It is the religious

attitude which the Pharisees assumed that he declares is of the devil. Pharisaism stands for all that which is the enemy of true religion in every age of the world and it was meet that this principle should be thus fittingly rebuked. It is more hostile to genuine piety than is shocking depravity. The latter is a ravening wolf and known as such and can be dealt with accordingly, but the former is a similar destroyer walking about in sheeps clothing. When Jesus said to these Jews: "If God were your Father ye would love me," he affirmed merely that if they truly recognized God as their Father and loved him supremely -which they did not though they pretended to do so- they could not but love himself, the Son of God, the express image of his person. His language states nothing as to their actual relationship or God's bearing towards them. We have no reason to suppose that he felt toward them anything but fatherly obligation and love. He may have been grieved at their self-righteousness and hardness of heart, yet he was their Father still, as much so as he was the Father of the prodigal. God may hate the sinner in the man, but he ever loves the man in the sinner and his feeling of obligation endures as long as hope has any foundation. Yet that was no occasion for the display of compassion. Rebuke of the most scathing and withering kind was the only thing in order. There must be a ruthless awaking to a realizing sense of their

actual condition. The prodigal is only too aware of his affinity for evil and must be informed of his kinship with heaven to call him to a better life; the self-righteous Pharisee, on the other hand, is so assured of his acceptance with God that he has lost that realizing sense of the presence of evil forces within, hidden though they be, which is the safeguard of every child of God, and must, accordingly, be awakened to such a consciousness.

The Fatherhood of God as taught by Jesus, while it has reference to all does not mean the same for all. An earthly parent cannot be a father to his wayward and disobedient children to the same effect as to those of his children who regard him with reverence and trust and render to him a full measure of loving obedience. No more can God. The complete relation and the full benefit of the Divine Fatherhood can exist only where there is the most perfect filial allegiance and receptivity. The Father's will to impart all the fullness of his of his own life may be frustrated by the disobedience and alienation more or less complete of his earthly children. Hence Christ's doctrine of the Fatherhood of God does not ignore moral distinctions and grades. Some experience more of the divine relationship than others. It means one thing for sinners; another thing for saints. All are sons now by virtue of their humanity, but some are sons more truly than others, because they enter

more fully into the divine life. This, clearly, is the teaching of the Savior in such a passage as the following, taken from the Sermon on the Mount: "Love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be the sons of your Father which is in heaven." The passage states that God is already their Father and hence they are already in some sense sons, yet they are urged to become sons in a fuller sense by sharing the divine attribute of love toward all, even toward their enemies. Such ethical distinctions Christ everywhere emphasises, indeed they are his chief theme. He came to make men more truly the sons of God, thus fulfilling the purpose of their creation. All men are already sons because they are ontologically related to God, having the divine attributes of freedom, intelligence and moral capacity. Christ calls upon them to realize their sonship by entering into the divine life through the fullest exercise of their God-given capacities, intellectual and ethical. It is to these latter that he makes his chief appeal; for therein is man most remiss, though he recognized at least a germ of goodness in every one and appealed to it again and again.

This same distinction is made by the apostles, but they erred in drawing the lines too hard and fast. Hence we do not find so clear a recognition of the sonship of all men as we found on the part of the Savior. This, however,

is not so true of Paul as of the other apostles. In his address at Athens (Acts 17; 28-29) Paul quoted the poet Aratus as saying of God, "For we are also his offspring. Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and device of man." Here, although the word sons is not mentioned, the apostle affirms a metaphysical kinship as subsisting between God and man. What John's final position was we may gather from his gospel.

We conclude then that the Christian conception of God is that of a Divine Fatherhood. Such a conception implies an ontological likeness between man and God, an intellectual and moral affiliation. The child and the parent are two distinct personalities, nevertheless, the child is what the father is. As children of the Highest we are partakers of the divine nature. This great truth of revelation receives most decided rational confirmation when we reflect upon the nature of our knowledge of God. Whence do we derive our knowledge of the Supreme Being? The idea of God, sublime and awful though it be, is the idea of our own personality, stripped of all that is gross and sensuous and enlarged to infinity. We find in ourselves all the elements of divinity, that is, attributes which reflect in finite measure the divine. We say: God is a spirit. What do we know of spirit save through our own personality?

The same is true of the moral attributes of Deity: these, too, are comprehended by us only through our own moral nature. It is conscience within ourselves that interprets to us God's love of virtue and hatred of sin. Rightly do we call it the voice of God in the human soul. Again, we speak of God's goodness. How can we understand this save as we interpret it by the principle of love within our own breasts? The again, we profess to see a revelation of God in nature. This is possible only because we have a mind kindred to his. WE see God outside of us because he dwells within us.

The fact that God's attributes are infinite and ours are finite does not make them different in kind. Love and wisdom, power and purity, do not change their essential character even when enlarged to infinity. Moreover, there are traces of infinity in the human soul. The very conception of infinity is born of our own limitless capacity. We ascribe the attributes to God chiefly because we possess capacities and wants which an infinite being alone can supply. Furthermore, so far as we know, our spiritual faculties, are capable of indefinite extension and development. The lowest depths of human love have never yet been sounded. The soul is always bursting its limits, continually thirsting for wider and fuller knowledge, perpetually longing for new and untried happiness.

Not only is this conception of God scriptural and

rational, but it is the highest possible and the most ennobling. Fatherhood includes creatorship, kingship and judgeship in a higher and larger unity. Fatherhood, moreover, reveals God as in intimate contact with us and tenderly solicitous for our welfare. Herein is its beneficent character manifested. Any conception which removes God to a distance must prove a source of weakness rather than of strength. The greatness and majesty of God naturally tends to crush the human spirit. To a frail and dependent creature such as man the thought of an omnipotent and omniscient creator easily becomes a source of terror and his worship is apt to become mere servility and flattery. When God is conceived as Father, however, he becomes a source of strength and comfort. Salvation, too, ceases to be a miraculous impartation of gifts foreign to the soul and becomes an unfoldment of our essential nature. To resemble God we need not renounce our humanity and flee from society, but only live our life in an ideal way, in active service with and for our fellow men.

This conception of God also commends itself in that it is one peculiarly adapted for human realization. The first relationship that makes itself felt upon the growing human intelligence is parenthood. Fatherhood, which really conveys all that is signified by the word parenthood, is the first and most elemental of human relationships and is the

nearest and most potent factor in every man's development. The conception of God as Father, accordingly, is one which seems to be anticipated in the economy of the created universe and for which man is in tutelage from the very dawn of consciousness. All the God that the young child knows is embodied in his parents and the clearer and more personal knowledge of God which the larger vision of later years brings is but the growth and expansion of what was thus first revealed through earthly parentage. Fatherhood yearns with love and pours its heart-wealth around the child; childhood responds to the appeal and returns love for love. To the child the divinest being known is his father, who shares his nature and yet is vastly superior. When the reflection of maturer years reveals the Unseen God it is inevitable that he think of him in terms of the one upon whom he has hitherto depended and call him Father.

It is this consciousness of God as Father which Christ came to bring to an ethical and practical perfection in every individual. Two great teachers of our time, Herrmann, of Marburg, and Fairbairn, of Oxford, have taught that to know the nature of God one must know the inner life or consciousness of Christ. Herrmann says, in his "Communion of the Christian with God", "The power of Jesus is the fact by which God communes with us." Fairbairn, in his 'The Place of Christ in Modern Theology' makes a statement to

the same effect: "The interpretation of God in the terms of the consciousness of Christ may thus be described as the distinctive and differentiating doctrine of the Christian religion." When we ask of what sort is this consciousness, we discover that it is the filial consciousness. Acknowledging the uniqueness of his relationship, it is, nevertheless, the filial element that characterizes the Christ consciousness. In him the filial consciousness, the consciousness of God as Father, found its perfect realization, and it is into a like consciousness that he would induct all of God's children. Thus the economy of nature finds its fulfillment in the person and work of Christ.

Having thus established the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God as the Christian conception of the Divine Being, it remains to indicate its bearing upon the Christian system as a body of doctrine. What warmth and radiance are diffused over the whole of the divine economy by this gracious conception of the Lord of the Universe! God, the Father of us all. It is love that is the mainspring of all his acts and the determining principle in all his works.. Creation was an act of love, a divine condescension, constituting personal agents with a nature akin to his own and so capable of entering into his life and of having conscious fellowship with him. Providence is an unceasing paternal solicitude,

1
a love that never slumbers and has regard for both the eternal and the temporal interests of man. Moral government is holy love doing all it can to bring every one to their true destination, a state of infinite felicity in God. Redemption is God providing, at infinite cost to himself, a way and a call of return to his erring children, in a manner consistent with the integrity of his nature. Retribution, is love chastening those who wander from the path of their own highest good that they may return to it and dealing wisely and mercifully with those who are finally incorrigible. Thus is the whole spiritual universe made luminous and living by this central sun of love, God's Fatherhood.

Worthy of special consideration, however, for the light which this conception of God sheds upon them, are the two doctrines of the Atonement and Regeneration.

2
The doctrine of the Atonement is one which men have almost despaired of comprehending. A most bewildering variety of theories have been advanced and to none, apparently, is granted an immunity from attack. An exhaustive study of the biblical doctrine of the Atonement reveals a consensus of teaching on three points, (1) that it has a Godward significance, (2) that it consists of our Lord's endurance of death in our behalf, and, finally, (3) that the spirit in which he suffered death is of vital importance to the efficacy of the of his sacrifice. Now it is manifest that if we would dis-

cover the true nature of the atonement, we must first determine the relation of God to mankind in virtue of which he demanded and provided atonement. The relationship which Christ revealed as that which God sustains to mankind is, as we have seen, that of Divine Fatherhood. Clearly, then, this must be the relationship in virtue of which God exacts and provides atonement. Fatherhood, moreover, as has been already mentioned, is the highest of all relationships. It includes creatorship, kingship and judgeship in a higher unity. A perfect manifestation of fatherhood involves all of these. Any view of God which magnifies one aspect of his Fatherhood at the expense of another is a distorted view.

When we approach the atonement from the standpoint of the Divine Fatherhood, we are persuaded first of all that the wrath which God feels toward the sinner must be of an essentially altruistic character. It is concerned far less for the integrity of the Father's life than it is for the integrity of the fatherly and filial bond. It is absurd to think for a moment that fatherly love would treasure up merely personal wrongs. The true father, when he seeks to maintain the integrity of his own life before his children, does so only because he represents the ideal which they are to realize. If he asserts and seeks to secure the sanctity of his law, it is not merely because it is the expression of his own nature, but more especially because it is for his children the way of

their own highest self-realization. The consciousness of wrong-doing must be brought home to the child through punishment, because this is the very means of uttering the conversion of the child. The pardon of a father is more than the pardon of a judge or a king, for it implies reception into favor, restoration into fellowship of life and love, and the first condition of this is the sanctity of the parental and filial bond enthroned in the heart of the one thus restored. Atonement to fatherhood lies in restored, realized and manifested sonship.

Accordingly, the only atonement possible to God as Father for the sin of the race is the immediate repentance-uttered through punishment and reformation- of the race as the whole, that is of every individual in it. This is practically unattainable. Sin remains as a race condition in spite of the repentance of individuals. The repentance of individuals here and there does not secure the recognition of the integrity of the moral law on the part of the rest of mankind. Hence any substitutionary act of satisfaction which is required to maintain the integrity of the parental and filial bond must, for the above reason alone, belong to a larger sphere than that of mere individual experiences. It must be a conspicuous act in order to insure that henceforth God's law would be held in universal honor. It must also be an influential act in that it makes known the love of God which

demands satisfaction and thus prompts to its repetition, so far as that is possible, on the part of each individual believer. But there are other equally cogent reasons why such an act of satisfaction lay beyond human power to perform. The homage to the divine authority must be complete, the obedience to the divine law must be perfect, and the endurance of the divine displeasure must be absolute. These conditions could be fulfilled only by some superhuman being and were historically realized by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ, by his incarnation became the Son of Man, realizing human nature in its sinless perfection and entering into the most sympathetic relations with men. By his advent Christ came under and exposed himself to that system which expresses and gives effect to the wrath of God against sin. To use Bushnell's phrase, "He was incarnated into the curse". During his entire career our Lord manifested the filial spirit in all its glory and in death made his last great offering to the Father. He thus completed an absolute self-surrender and gave adequate proof his love for God and his repudiation of unrighteousness. Hence the Savior's life ~~thus~~ found its supreme expression in his death and both his life and death were vicarious in that he did for us through them that which was both necessary to be done and impossible for us to do.

This theory is wholly in keeping with the character

of God as Love and yet makes full provision for the objective element which is so prominent in the scriptural teaching on the atonement. It is this objective element which has so perplexed the theologians. The necessity for it in the human moral economy was clearly recognized, but just how to construe it on the Godward side without the imputation of arbitrariness or even vindictiveness was not seen. But, when we recognize that God is the Father of mankind, and perceive the necessity of maintaining the integrity of the filial bond, then the difficulty largely vanishes. From the point of view of the Fatherhood of God the scriptural doctrine of the atonement becomes rationally comprehensible and the atonement itself is revealed as the highest pledge of the Father's love.

The doctrine of regeneration is likewise one which is in special need of interpretation from the point of view of the Divine Fatherhood. How foreign to such a conception is the Calvinistic notion of regeneration as the exclusive work of God upon human souls arbitrarily selected. According to this conception God with-holds from vast multitudes of human beings that almighty and efficacious grace without which their persistence in sin and final perdition is not only certain, but inevitable, do what they may in the way of holy endeavor. What a travesty on the love of God! If the Fatherhood of God means anything, it means that his regenerating grace is free to all who seek it and that, far

from hiding himself, he runs to meet those who in true repentance turn to him.

There is yet another sense in which this doctrine in which this doctrine needs to be interpreted by the Fatherhood of God. Even in its purified form the doctrine of regeneration or the new birth is being subjected to severe criticism in our day. Many sincere and devout Christians are denying the fact of regeneration altogether. Dr. Rainsford, of New York, recently put himself on record with a statement to the above effect. He declared that he himself had never experienced the new birth, nor had any of the members of his family. Such, from all accounts, has been the experience of many, both clergymen and laymen. They have sought the experience, but in vain. How are we to construe such testimony as this?

If we were to accept it as representing the actual facts in the case, it would go far to establish the old Calvinistic notion of regeneration. Apparently, the Lord has passed such persons by: they are not among the elect. The other alternative is to question the accuracy of the statements without impugning the sincerity or veracity of the witnesses. They are confounding regeneration with certain manifestations which often accompany it.

If God be the Father of all men, then regeneration cannot be ontological, but only ethical. Moreover, as ethical it cannot mean the same for all men. Its ethical mani-

festations and its emotional accompaniments will depend altogether upon the degree of alienation from God. To expect the same phenomena in the case of a young man who has always been subjected to Christian influences as in the case of the hardened sinner of forty is absurd. In the latter case the moment of spiritual birth will be distinct and conscious and, unless the individual be exceedingly phlegmatic, marked by more or less violent emotional disturbance. The change in his ethical life will appear very marked to those who observe him. All this is because of the abruptness of the transition from the life of sin to the life of holiness and the extreme contrast between them. In the case of the young man, however, there can be no very marked change of conduct nor is there liable to be any very violent emotional disturbance. Indeed, we can readily imagine a case when there would be absolutely no consciousness of spiritual regeneration. A child, nurtured by Christian parents, has been taught to love and revere God from the very dawn of spiritual capacity. When it reaches maturity it can never recall the time when it has not known the love of God or felt anything but love toward him. Can we deny a regenerate nature to this child of God? The impulses of the unregenerate life were nipped in the very bud and it has lived a regenerate life from the start, and the filial ideal has been increasingly realized with the passing years. It is monstrous to question the genuineness of the

Christian character attained by such an one. That life is as remote from the plane of nature as is the life of one who has a distinct recollection of the change from death unto life.

In conclusion we may summarize the results of our study. We have seen that the Christian conception of God is that of a divine Father. This conception is one that is in entire accord with our reason and most satisfactory to our moral sense. As the central conception of the Christian teaching it furnishes the key to its entire system of doctrine. Many of the difficulties and all of the monstrosities of the historical theological systems have arisen largely through the illegitimate use of the metaphysical, juristic and governmental ideas and analogies to set forth the nature and relations of God. Such travesties upon the love of God as the doctrine of election, of limited atonement, and infant damnation would never have been possible had the Church recognized and accepted Christ's doctrine of the universal Fatherhood of God.

Bibliography.

"The Kingdom of God" Bruce.

"The Mind of the Master" Watson.

"The Spiritual Principle of
the Atonement" Lidgett.

"Works" Channing

"American Journal of Theology"

July, 1897, Professor C. M. Mead.

July, 1901, Professor G. W. Northrup.

"Biblical World"

October, 1898, Armory H. Bradford.

"Atonement" Bishop S. M. Merrill.
